

Sermon Proper 24
October 16th, 2022
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During my freshman year at Notre Dame I met Steve Moriarty. Steve was a senior, a theology major (odd), and for reasons that weren't entirely clear, enjoyed breaking into the basement of the main campus church, Sacred Heart Basilica. On Saturday evenings at our local pizza hangout he would recount his latest foray into the bowels of the neo-gothic church and occasionally share with us some of the loot from his visit.

One memorable evening he brought to the table a large bound book containing the newsletters of the Prefect of Religion for the University for the early 1930's. It was a fascinating time capsule of life on the campus. And there were carefully calculated statistical charts that have remained vivid in my mind over 50 years later.

The Prefect of Religion, we'd call him the Campus Minister now, was concerned about the spiritual life of the student body. It also seemed that he had a passionate interest in the success of Notre Dame's football team. And that's where the statistics come in. Every week during football season he charted the relationship between the number of students receiving communion and the number of touchdowns scored by the football team. He had a second chart that noted the number of students attending confession and the number of injuries sustained by the team. He exhorted students to greater piety in the sure and certain hope that the team would benefit as a result.

This rather transactional approach to prayer, not that uncommon in our own time, isn't what Jesus is trying to tell us in today's parable. The entertaining story of the persistent widow and the heartless judge seeks to remind his disciples and us, of the need to pray always and to not lose heart - no matter what happens or who wins the game. Widows in Jesus' day were among the most vulnerable people in that patriarchal society. They lived a precarious life at best. And, the widow in our parable is looking for justice. To right some wrong - we don't know what. And though the heartless judge

cares nothing about the woman or her case, her persistence pays off. The judge relents and finds in her favor. The core of the story is her persistence wearing down the disinterested of the judge.

But, of course, God is not a disinterested judge, though there are times when it seems that way. Not all prayers are answered. The early church that produced this Gospel knew that all too well. Victims of exclusion and persecution, **they recognized that Jesus' call to pray always, wasn't a recipe for success. It was an invitation to relationship. 2X**

How many of us have fervently prayed for things that did not happen: recovery from illness for a loved one, realizing some deeply held hope/ambition, assuring the well-being of our children. Not everything we pray for happens.

“The life of faith is not only about telling God what our wish list is, but constantly lifting up every joy and concern, fear and doubt, every lament and plea and complaint to the one who created, loves, sustains us.

Bringing it all to God. That's why I love the book of Psalms. It has the full range of human emotion framed as prayer to God: thanksgiving, repentance, complaint, exhaltation, grief, fear, rage - the whole spectrum of human experience can be found somewhere in those verses. The Psalms are an invaluable school for prayer. And it's why they form a central part of our prayer life as Episcopalians - which is why the entire book of Psalms is present in the Prayer Book.

Consider for a moment the persistence of God to be in relationship with us! One way to read the Bible is as a case study in God's persistence to invite, entice, pursue us - even taking on flesh in Jesus, who was willing to suffer and die for us - that we might finally get the depth and breadth of God's love for us! Now that's persistence!

So the teller of this parable - Jesus - time after time, parable after parable, miracle after miracle - knocks at our door, taps us on the should, grabs us by the nape of the neck - to get our attention.

And, throughout his public ministry he modeled a life of prayer: corporate worship in the synagogue and Temple, solitary prayer in the wilderness, prayers for healing, and prayers for blessing. Jesus was a man of prayer and an example to us. And not all of his prayers were answered either! I often think of Jesus prayer in the Garden of Gethesemane. When faced with the immanence of his own death, he prays tearfully "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."

Your will be done - familiar to us from the Lord's prayer - even more poignant in Jesus' prayer in the garden.

We are invited to bring all of ourselves to God: our hopes, our fears, our sorrows, our regrets, all of it - because that's how relationships grow and deepen. Prayer is the language of our relationship with God. And Jesus invites us to be like that widow - unflagging, persistent: Praying when we feel good, when we're sad, when we've bored, when we've got too much to do, when we're late, when the children are yelling, here it is: That wild, complicated, maddening drama that is our lives - in all of it - praying, bringing it all to God.

Trusting, like Jesus did in the Garden, that God's love is deeper, wilder and more amazing than we can imagine. Trusting that God's love has our best interests at heart, even if the specific request remains unanswered. Or as one of our Morning Prayers states: "Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us." Thy will be done.

Several of us were blessed to attend the open house for the new Lodi Access Center yesterday. The work they are doing is inspiring indeed, informed by the transformed lives of their staff - many of whom have known addiction, homelessness, prison - the

depths of hopelessness. But in the worst moments of their lives - someone reached out with the love of Christ - sometimes with great persistence like our widow - and miraculous things have happened, and continue to happen.

When things are good, when things are awful/frightening: Jesus invites us to pray, to not lose heart, to trust in God - even when the way is dark, especially when the way is dark.

Thomas Merton wrote a wonderful prayer, a rephrasing of the 23rd Psalm that speaks to this and to our journey as disciples.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.

And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road although I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.