

October 20, 2019 – Luke 18:1-8

Prayer is one of those things that can either make God feel incredibly personal or incredibly distant. After all, he's either listening or he's not. There isn't much in between.

If he's listening, then prayer is the most personal thing in the world. It is you sitting down with God. One on one. Pouring out your heart to him. Your guilt and regrets. Your hopes and dreams. Your needs and desires.

In prayer, we put everything on the table. You can't hold back because you're praying to a God who already knows what's in your heart and mind. You are utterly transparent in the eyes of a God who is loving and powerful and forgiving. It's an amazing thing.

But... what if he's not listening? Or, if he is listening, what if he's just doesn't care? Oh, I know as a pastor I'm not supposed to say that. Not supposed to even suggest it. I'm supposed to be leading the charge as we plow forward. Without the slightest hint of doubt or wavering faith. And say with absolute confidence,

“God is there. He is all-powerful. He is all-loving. If you pray, he will answer your prayer. You just need to have faith. Period. End of story. No more questions. No more doubts. Stop asking these foolish what-if's and just believe.”

But still, the doubts will be there. Gnawing away at the back of your mind. Making prayer feel like absolute foolishness. “You're just talking to the air,” your brain tells you. “God doesn't care about your petty little problems. God's doesn't want to hear from a sinner like you. There's no one listening. It's all nonsense.”

Have you ever felt like that? Ever had a thought like that go through your mind? If you haven't, you're a better man or woman than I. Because it certainly has happened to me.

I'm not saying I listen to the doubts. That I put any stock in them. That I let them change me or stop me from praying. But they're still there. Just like they were there for countless other pastors, theologians, and church fathers.

Prayer is one of those things that can either make God feel incredibly personal or incredibly distant. Incredibly loving or incredibly uncaring. And usually, he's either one or the other. Rarely is he ever something in between.

And that's what Jesus was trying to illustrate in our Gospel lesson today. Jesus spends a lot of time talking about prayer in the Gospels. I don't know if that's because his immediate audience really needed to hear it. Or if we, 2000 years later, need to hear it. Most likely, it's just something humanity has always and will always need to hear. But prayer comes up a lot in Jesus' sermons.

Today, it comes up in the form of a parable. But that parable is told in the midst of a larger sermon. A sermon about the end times.

The passage that precedes this one is a rather vivid, rather fervent description by Jesus of how the end of the world will come when everyone least expects it. And that those who are the most secure in their money and possessions and luxury will be the ones most surprised by it. And they will also be the ones who suffer the most because of it.

This transitions abruptly into this parable about prayer. And we know this parable is about prayer because St Luke rather thoughtfully tells us that it's about prayer: *“And [Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”*

That's the point. That's the punchline. That's the message that we're supposed to take away from this. So how do we get from point A to point B?

Well, it's not easy. Because this is not a easy parable to understand. Take, for example, the three characters here. We have a judge, we have a widow, and we have the widow's adversary. Now, typically, based on that information alone, I could take a few educated guesses about who represents who.

The judge represents God. Why? Because God himself is a judge. And, on top of that, the person in the greatest position of a authority in any parable is usually God. That then probably makes the widow us and her adversary something evil or sinful around us.

Pretty simple. Pretty straightforward. And a pretty big mess. Because the first thing we find out about this judge is that he is unrighteous and unjust. He is arrogant and prideful and lazy. And frankly, he looks completely incompetent.

Because this widow has been fighting her adversary for years. Desperately trying to get justice. And this judge is the only thing standing in her way. And the problem isn't that he's actively helping her adversary or actively hurting her. The problem is that he's not doing ANYTHING.

He is sitting in his office playing solitaire and checking Facebook for hours on end. While she stands outside his door. Pleading for him to Do. His. Job.

And for a long time he ignores her. For a long time he sits there, letting her beg. But after a while, he just gets sick of hearing her complain. Day after day after day. She won't stop whining. Until finally he says, "Alright! I'll hear your case. I'll give you the justice you deserve. Just be quiet!"

It's a relatable situation. We've all dealt with lazy, incompetent people in positions of authority. Generally, though, we would not immediately think of them as symbols of God. And yet, that's exactly what this judge does symbolize. The judge does represent God. And the widow does represent us.

At least, the judge represents God from our perspective. Because try as we might to believe that God is loving and powerful and listening to every single one of our prayers. Sometimes we just start to wonder whether he's listening at all. Whether he cares about us at all. Whether he's ever going to help us in our time of need.

Sometimes God *feels* an awful lot like a really cruel, lazy judge. Sitting up in heaven playing on his cell phone. While we're down here on earth, begging him for justice. Begging him to deliver us from evil.

That's what it feels like sometimes. It's not true. Jesus himself tells us that. He ends the parable by saying that God hears the prayers of His elect. He does not delay over them. He gives them justice speedily. That's the truth. God hears. God answers. God cares.

But the point of the parable is this: even if it were true, even if – hypothetically – God were an unrighteous, lazy judge, does that mean that we should stop praying? Or does that mean that we should pray even harder?

Does that mean we should stand at his door like that widow in the parable, day and night, morning and evening, day after day after day? Whining, pestering, begging him for justice? Until finally, out of sheer annoyance, he answers our prayer, just to get us to be quiet already?

You have doubts sometimes? So do I. So does every sinful human being. It's part of what we lost in the Fall. There was a time when man and God walked side-by-side in the Garden of Eden. But we lost that. And now we pray by faith. Full of frail human doubts and frail human questions.

And so Jesus looks at us and says, "You have doubts? That's OK. Just don't let them stop you from praying."

Because Christ is returning. The Son of Man will come. And when he comes, will he find faith on the earth? That's the question that Jesus leaves us at the end of this lesson. "*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*"

It sounds, at first glance, kind of ominous. Kind of judgmental. Do any of you believe? Am I going to have to send you all to hell?

That's not what I hear, though. What I hear is a promise. The Son of Man is coming. Christ is returning. And when he comes, he brings with him that one final answer to our prayer, "Deliver us from evil."

For that is exactly what he is coming to do. He is coming to rescue us from a world of evil. To rescue us from the evil inside our very flesh and blood. To rescue us from the evil one, Satan, the Adversary, the devil himself.

He comes to answer our prayers. To answer every prayer. To bring us a world where there are no prayers. Because we will have everything we need. And God himself will walk side-by-side with us.

He comes to be a righteous judge. To fulfill his mission as Savior and Lord. To eliminate every doubt we ever had about him.

When he comes, will he find faith on the earth? Of course he will! How could he not. His kingdom has already come. On the cross. In our hearts. In this very pulpit and on this very altar. His kingdom comes wherever his Word is preached and his sacraments delivered. And where his kingdom comes, there is faith on the earth.

The Son of Man is coming. So keep praying and do not lose heart. For your prayer is about to be answered. Amen.