

Sermon for October 16, 2016 - "How Can We Keep Praying?"

Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost
October 16, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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"How Can We Keep Praying?"

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart- a parable that seems to indicate that persistence pays off. So, if we're persistent and have a positive attitude and enough faith, then God will reward us and make everything better. Just put on a happy face and keep on keeping on. At least that's the way this parable often gets interpreted in our American context.

I know the big take away I had from my confirmation class was 'have faith and be happy'. That could be because the year I was confirmed our youth group also did a production of the musical *Bye Bye Birdie*. Apparently there weren't any other stories, from say the Bible, deemed valuable enough for our musical energies. One of the songs from *Bye Bye Birdie* is entitled "Put on a Happy Face" as in ... "brush off the clouds and cheer up, put on a happy face." Those lyrics messed with my understanding of Christianity for a long time. But even without an awesome youth group dinner theater experience, a typical American interpretation of this parable is that if we're really sincere then ... "gray skies are gonna clear up" because God fixes everything for those who truly have faith.

In this interpretation the widow is seen as a kind of 'little engine that could' who just keeps on chugging - I think I can, I think I can - and then finally gets the attention of the big guy upstairs who grants her request and pushes her over the mountain. Except sometimes the mountain is crowded with people fleeing from Syria; sometimes the skies stay frighteningly dark for days of torrential rains and hurricanes; sometimes the daily news makes it hard to put on a happy face. Sometimes we persist in praying over and over and over and see no change. What does this parable have to say to us then? How do we pray always and not lose heart in the face of the suffering around us?

We can start to despair - thinking we just don't have enough faith or persistence, or that God doesn't care and prayer doesn't really matter. To avoid that despair, we sometimes try to ignore suffering and the questions it raises. We approach prayer and worship as a chance to get away and get refueled so that we can just keep on chugging along on our merry way. Yet Jesus' parable is not about a perky, persistent little engine that gets over the hump with the right amount of faith and a good dose of divine intervention. Jesus' parable is about a widow, a widow stridently demanding justice when justice has long been denied.

Widows receive special attention in scripture and deserve our attention as well. Widows were among the most vulnerable people in society. They knew that they were at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control, dependent on the men around them for financial security. Yet Biblical widows also knew that God saw them and valued them. Throughout scripture we hear repeatedly that God cares about widows and orphans, that God commands people to care for them as well. Widows in scripture were people who lived with a deep awareness of two powerful realities - life is hard AND God is faithful. They looked suffering in the face and trusted God. That stance helped them play key roles in God's story. Widows were not only dependent and vulnerable, they were also very faithful agents of God's work in the world.

A widow trusted God and shared the last food she had with the prophet Elijah and kept him alive. But right after that, her son died. The widow was furious and goaded Elijah into raising her son from the dead. The widow Naomi told her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth to return to her own family, but Ruth stayed with Naomi and showed her great loyalty and love. The Hebrew word used for Ruth's love is 'Hesed', the same word used repeatedly to describe God's steadfast, loving kindness. Then Ruth went on to become an ancestor to Jesus. Widows got special attention from Jesus including the widow who gave all she had at the temple, trusting that God would care for her. Biblical widows faced the brokenness of the world while also looking for and responding to signs of God's saving, active presence.

This capacity to see and hold both realities - brokenness and God's faithfulness - often develops in people who have gone through great personal trials. This capacity is also deepened when we pray not as a way to escape but as a way to engage the world. When we pray as a way to engage God's world, we bring all the pain to our prayer and we boldly pray for God to see, hear, act and respond. Sometimes this feels futile, sometimes God feels like a distant unjust judge; but scripture shows us that God chooses to act in the world because of the prayers of people. God has entered so deeply into relationship with us that it matters to God when we pray about the pain of the world. Our lives and the biblical stories are not happy musicals or morality tales about little engines, so things don't work out in a neat, 'happily ever after' way. But, God works in and through the brokenness to bring life out of death. This is what God does.

So we bring the pain to God again and again; but we don't stop there. We also pray for help in seeing what God is doing, how God is bringing life out of death, and how we can join God's work in the world. We look for signs of the new life God is bringing about in and through us. Our prayer helps us to pay attention to these signs of life and then work to make them more real and more visible. When we approach prayer in this way it is possible to pray always. As we respond to the brokenness, we're praying. As we look for signs of life, we're praying.

And it is possible to not lose heart. As we look at the devastation in Syria we also see the White Helmets, the volunteers who have saved more than 60,000 Syrian lives. As we look at the effects of flooding and hurricanes we also see neighbors, churches and communities bringing help. In a time when our national conversation has become so vile, we see people speaking out with courage and compassion. These signs feel small sometimes, as small as a widow's request or meager offering at the temple; but they point to another reality at work in the world. Prayer helps us to see and be part of that new reality. Prayer also helps us to persist in working for justice like this persistent widow, even when justice is long delayed. It helps us to speak out, call leaders to account and stand up to injustice.

So this week, let's pray with all the news of the week. As we read, listen to, or watch the news, let's keep our Psalm for this week, Psalm 121, close and pray it together as we hear about all the brokenness. When we feel overwhelmed, let's turn to the Psalm and be reminded that God is working new life and we can be a part of that work. "I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. The LORD will not let your foot be moved nor will the one who watches over you fall asleep. Behold, the keeper of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

Thanks be to God.