

“Persistence in Prayer and Action”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; August 29, 2021

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told the disciples a parable on the necessity of praying always and not losing heart: “Once there was a judge in a certain city who feared no one—not even God. A woman in that city who had been widowed kept coming to the judge and saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a time the judge refused, but finally the judge thought, ‘I care little for God or people, but this woman won’t leave me alone. I’d better give her the protection she seeks, or she’ll keep coming and wear me out!’” Jesus said, “Listen to what this corrupt judge is saying. Won’t God then do justice to the chosen who call out day and night? Will God delay long over them? I tell you, God will give them swift justice. “But when the Promised One comes, will faith be found anywhere on earth?”

Javen has wanted to renew our living room for years. The furniture in there was from a family member almost a decade ago. It’s a little too big for the space and doesn’t make the best use of a small room, but it works okay if you ask me. Our two cats have scratched the couch corners and the rug over the years, so we’ve said that after they are gone we’ll do something new in the space. What’s also true is that I’m accustomed to the status quo, I don’t want to deal with the disruption of another home project, and I’m cheap.

Something shifted, though, in the plans I thought were years into the future. For months, Javen has persisted in turning up the heat on this idea. He invited an interior designer to give us a free consult, “just to get some ideas”. He created a Pinterest board for the project, and I knew it was getting serious. He brought home cards with paint colors on them, and left them lying around as discussion starters. Finally last Monday, we went to “just look” at sectionals at two nearby stores. The first place said that furniture orders were taking months to fulfill, and supply was so short they weren’t even selling the floor models. I thought, “Whew! We can postpone this due to lack of inventory.” But wouldn’t you know, the second place had exactly what we had discussed—it was the right color, shape and style, sitting right there in front of us, for about half the price of what we had been expecting to find. So we bought it, and I kissed goodbye any hopes of free time this week.

Tuesday night when I got home, Javen had already disassembled the living room. I knew it was going to be a big change when he greeted me at the door with, “Don’t be alarmed, but I started doing some things.” The horse was out of the barn at this point, so we ordered the rest of what was needed to make the room right. He sold or gave away furniture pieces we were no longer using, so they went to folks who could give them another good life. Wednesday was patching and spackling the walls, Thursday was taping and priming, Friday we put on the first coat of new paint, and yesterday was the second coat, plus even parts of the ceiling. Javen did much of the work, but I helped too. Mostly because I wanted to be close enough when things went sideways to say, “I told you this wasn’t a good idea.” Finally, yesterday afternoon the painting was done, we wrestled the sectional through narrow doors, and Javen put together a new TV stand and wall-mounted lights. We tried out the arrangement after dinnertime, and I must admit that despite my protestations along the way, it really *is* a big improvement.

I’m not saying that Javen is the persistent widow and I’m the unjust judge, but I’m not *not* saying that either.

Being on the receiving end of a months-long campaign for change has helped me appreciate the situation this judge was in, when the widow kept showing up day after day after day. The judge is used to his word being final—what he decides is the law of the land. But this woman wouldn’t take “no” for an answer. After he dismissed her case, she kept bothering him, saying “Grant me justice against my opponent!” “No, get over it.” “But sir, I’m a widow. I’m on my own now, forced to sleep on the street. You’re the only one who can make it right. Grant me justice against my opponent.” “NO. That settles it. Now get out of here!” “Sir, I’m not going away. Grant me justice.” “No, no, no, no, no.” “But you’re the only hope I have left—

grant me justice!” And no matter how often he said “no”, she still came back to him. When the judge arrived at court in the morning, she was there waiting at the front of the line. Hers was the last voice he heard going home. When he left the building, he had to pass by her protests. She followed him home and pounded on the door. When he tried to relax with a bath, her voice came from outside the house. When he put cotton in his ears and stuffed a pillow over his head to fall asleep, he still could not get any peace. When he stepped out to get the paper in the morning, she was there on his doorstep. On and on this went, for day after day, until finally the bedraggled, harassed, unshaven, and unslept judge had had enough. “I don’t fear God, and I don’t care about human beings, but this woman is driving me crazy. Take your justice, and leave me alone!”

Jesus says that prayer is like the widow’s pleading—insistent, persistent, not taking “no” for an answer. And if even an unjust judge could be persuaded by constant pleading, how much more so God, who is generous and hears all our prayers? To be sure, there’s enough injustice and global calamity to cause despair in good people everywhere. The pandemic, Afghanistan, climate change, hurricanes, racial disparities—there’s so much trouble in life that it may seem like prayer is whistling into the wind. We pray about these things, and pray for wisdom in dealing with them, but the problems don’t seem to go away, or are replaced by new ones. Nevertheless, Jesus says, with a persistent heart of prayer, our corners of creation will be transformed, and justice will be done.

Prayer is the way we turn hopelessness over to God and make ourselves more available to what we *can* do in our situations. When prayer becomes a way of life, it changes the course of life. Kimberly Bracken Long writes that: “...our prayers do not constitute so many unanswered pleas; rather, they are our participation in the coming reign of God. By praying continually, and not giving up hope, we live in the surety that God has not abandoned this world. Living in hope, we work, in whatever ways we can, for the justice and peace that is coming.”¹ In other words, prayer leads inside a person, but then outside as well, calling us to do what we can for the sake of the kingdom of God. Prayer takes on physical shape, such as when Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel walked with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights movement on protest marches throughout the United States. Rabbi Heschel later [wrote](#), “For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”

Persistence in prayer renews our faith God’s promise to bring about a future with justice. It gives us courage to take action as well, joining in the cost and joy of Christian discipleship. We pray for the person who is sick, then send a card or bring over a casserole. We pray for our children, then strive for compassion even when they fail our expectations. We pray for the church, then make it better by participating in the church’s life. We pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done”, then we go out and do it to the best of our abilities. It’s like every conversation that Javen started with me about the living room, patiently opening my heart and imagination to the change that was possible. And prayer like this can bring about so much more than a new sectional.

We persist in prayer and action because God’s deliverance is already known in Jesus. We worship and serve in *response* to the one who entered this broken world and overcame unjust suffering for the sake of God’s love. Resurrection is more powerful than crucifixion. When all our doubts pile up like stones over a tomb and there seems to be no way, God makes a way. This is the faith that is written on our hearts, renewed with every prayer. Therefore, from now until eternity, for as long as it takes to see justice in the world, let us persist in prayer, and keep showing up, our bodies and hearts moving in love and justice for God’s realm, on earth as in heaven. And watch for pictures of our living room—proof that change can happen! Amen.

¹ Kimberly Bracken Long, “Luke 18:1-8—Pastoral Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 190.