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Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:40

Powerful Prayers

Luke 18:1-8a

I. *Are persistent*

II. *Are confident*

Of all the aspects of our faith and walk with God perhaps prayer is the most difficult and contrary to our common sense. Few people struggle with the idea that sinners in a fallen world cannot see God with their own eyes here and now. Personally I haven't met anyone who simply cannot understand how and all-powerful God would work miracles in the world. People can easily understand that true faith leads a person to forsake himself and calls a person to love and serve others. It makes good sense that God doesn't come to us in our thoughts and feelings which would be hopelessly subjective and ultimately not shareable but that God does come into our lives through the Bible and the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion which are objective and can therefore be shared and understood by all people. But prayer is different. In some ways prayer just doesn't make sense. This is why so few Christians develop a disciplined prayer life.

Prayer is a grand exercise of faith. What after all can anyone tell God in prayer that He doesn't already know? We also know that God runs the universe—we don't. Yet, at times doesn't the very exercise of prayer whereby we keep asking God to do such and such in a particular way appear that we direct or even worse, manipulate God? Prayer seems like the tail wagging the dog!

The Bible is clear: God commands every believer in Him to pray. Jesus' words teach us how we are to pray—persistently and confidently. **Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'" (verses 1-3).**

Jesus shares with us two very different people: an ungodly faithless, self-centered judge and a largely powerless widow being persecuted. The woman succeeded only because she was persistent; the judge didn't want to be bothered by the woman any longer. **"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bother-ing me, I will see that she gets**

justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

(verses 4-5).

At first hearing it seems that Jesus' words are making prayer harder not easier to understand! Do we have a stingy God who is reluctant to answer prayer? Do we have a God who loves to display His power and authority by making people beg before He does anything? Even the weakest and ill-informed faith knows that neither of these things are true. So what is Jesus' ultimate point of the parable?

First, Jesus' parable teaches that powerful prayers are persistent prayers—this is the simple meaning of the parable. As we dig deeper using all of Scripture to help us understand Jesus' words here we see that God calls us to persistency for good reason.

Think for a moment of Jesus' entire ministry. Jesus the greatest teacher the world has ever known took a full three years of ministry, much of it with just twelve men. Even more amazing, God in the flesh took upwards of thirty full years before even starting His public ministry!

When Jesus did begin His ministry He didn't perform His boldest and grandest miracles—such as raising the dead—first, but rather He began with a comparatively simple miracle at a wedding turning water into wine. Jesus didn't begin teaching His disciples by first telling them that all they would be doing together would lead up to Jesus dying on the cross but rather Jesus slowly, methodically taught them the true nature of God and slowly formed and prepared them for a powerful ministry of their own.

In many ways those disciples are not unlike us. The disciples had a clouded and inaccurate understanding of God because they were sinners. Jesus taught them the truth and that took time. The disciples were full of self-doubt and it took time for Jesus to build up their confidence in doing works of ministry. Think for a moment of the joy and the surprise of the seventy-two workers Jesus sent out to heal and to proclaim the kingdom of God. **"Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."** (Luke 10:17).

But more than all of this all of the disciples had their hearts set on far too little. The disciples would have been satisfied and indeed yearned for simply a Savior that would bless them with an earthly kingdom. Remember what James and John—the sons of Zebedee—said to Jesus?

"Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." (Mark 10:35-37). The glory they were speaking of was the glory of an earthly king. They wanted nothing more than a respected position within that kingdom. How much more did God have prepared for them and the world!

God often doesn't answer our prayers right away not because He is stingy or indecisive but rather He is calling us and leading us to an even greater faith so that He may bless us with far more than we could have dreamt of asking for. God always provides and accomplishes far more than we can dream of. Part of our spiritual growth that we learn from persistently praying to God is learning of how great and gracious He really is.

We enter this world totally focused on the here and now and on ourselves. Sadly, that is exactly where sin keeps people—how much fun and comfort can I have here in this world? Christ changes all that.

In faith we see ourselves in light of God and eternity and that changes everything. We still live in the world and God does call us to pray about earthly things. "Give us this day our daily bread." But we pray for earthly things differently than we pray for heavenly things.

If we are struggling with our jobs we are to pray about our jobs. If we are out of work or underemployed we are to pray about those things. If we are ill or a loved one is sick we are certainly to pray about that but we pray about those things in light of eternity and the simple fact that this world is drawing to a close and we are destined for so much more.

Saint Paul had a "thorn in the flesh" that troubled him and he prayed to God three times to remove it. Saint Paul knew full well that he would eventually die and be with the Lord so the most important thing he could do this side of heaven was preach the Gospel and share the good news. God answered that prayer directly telling Paul that He would not remove that thorn because it would actually help his ministry. With that Paul was satisfied and found comfort in the Lord.

To be sure, God will not speak to us the way He spoke to Paul and that is why we need to be persistent even with prayers for earthly blessings but we always pray with a perspective of the Lord's return and our place in eternity. When we pray about earthly blessings we pray for what we need and leave it in God's hands.

As we grow in the Lord and our hearts are transformed by God our greatest desires are for spiritual blessings. As parents and grandparents would we rather have our children and grandchildren rich and well to do or would we rather have them with an unshakable faith? As Christians would we rather have a perfect church building or a congregation of people growing and loving and carrying out the Lord's work? Of course in each situation we would have the latter.

This is why Jesus' words in today's parable are so comforting. Jesus asks. **"Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?"** (verse 7). Jesus then answers: **"I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly."** (verse 8).

God died for the whole world! God desires His Word to go out to every place in the world and raise up a people for Himself. God wants everyone to hear the Gospel and come to a saving faith. God promises a rich and great harvest at the end of the age.

Jesus who loved us so much that He died for all our sins has guaranteed victory! This is why powerful prayers are prayed confidently.

We can pray for our loved ones. We can pray for our church. We can pray for the missionaries who carry out the message of the Gospel. We can even pray for our enemies and those who hate us. God is powerful and He is good. God hears our prayers—He has told us in no uncertain terms. Because of this we can pray boldly in the name of Jesus.

Despite all of the threats and the challenges and possible dangers that Luther and our Christian forefathers faced they always found peace and comfort in two things. First, they knew that they simply had to be faithful to the Bible—God's Word which would do God's work in the world. Second, they found comfort in prayer. Indeed, Luther credited prayer with safeguarding himself and the entire reformation knowing that God hears and answers prayers always in a way best for those He loves so much He died for. Today, it is our joy knowing we can be so confident as we pray and will continue to do so till Christ Himself returns! Amen.