



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
19th Sunday after Pentecost: October 20, 2019
Sermon Title: "Keeping Faith in Prayer"
Gospel: Gospel: Luke 18:1-8

Have you ever noticed how loud TV commercials are, much louder than what you are watching? There's a reason for that- they want to make sure you still hear the commercial even if you leave the room. Have you ever gotten irritated when you are on the computer and those pop up ads get in the way when all you wanted to do was check the news? Or may someone incessantly e-mails or texts you. Maybe it's one of those phone survey calls that will "only take a minute," but we know will last much longer. We just want them to go away. Some of your faces say it all.

What if God felt that way about our requests?

Once with kids we created prayer boxes- little decorated boxes out of recycled cigar boxes. Each unique box helped someone see their prayers to God each day, to get comfortable talking to God and feel in some way they were heard. Little pieces of prayer, put into the box. One day, a girl came back with a dilemma. "Pastor, my box is full. What do I do?" She decided to throw away the answered prayers, as we talked about the ones that had not been answered, about her hopes and needs, and considered what God might be saying. When we don't get an answer, we struggle with seeing God's heart and we begin to imagine God is maybe like us. Too bothered.

When we are losing faith, we say things like, "I just can't find the right words." "Maybe God doesn't care about this." "Someone else has it worse, so I shouldn't bother." "Maybe I'm not worthy." "Maybe God doesn't want to hear this." This is "Unjust Judge" type thinking. Prayer, and its "results" can be a mystery. The gospel reminds us we're not trying to get God to just give in so we will go away. Friends, we're not prying a blessing out of a rigid hand. And contrary to what some popular imaginings, God won't hear us more if we pray the right words, or have enough people praying to tip the scales. And Jesus hoping that he will find faith is not just a "goodness test." After a late night of football if that's all you can take in it would be enough.

But just like on TV, wait! There's more. Jesus' parable says that unlike our own limits, we cannot actually "wear out God's listening ear." But knowing how easy it is to fall into the beliefs I just mentioned, Jesus teaches his followers (us) that prayer is sometimes a wrestling with our desires and God's heart. There are many things one could say about prayer. I've got three thoughts, all of which have to do with our hearts and God's heart beating together, the very thing we who are waiting can keep in mind, in the in-between times in our everyday lives, and in our waiting for kingdom come.

The first is that our greatest need is communion with God. There's a story of a little boy who runs away from home at about 3:00 p.m., starting out towards the end of town. He's mad at his mother who didn't give him what he wanted when he wanted it. But about 4:00 p.m. he starts to get hungry, his stomach begins to growl. He has a change of heart and decides to return home. He thinks his greatest need is supper. But his greatest need is for his mother.

We come to God with our requests that are very important to us and begin to pray asking for what we want. And more than we want to admit, it's the only time we seek God. If every request was answered immediately, we would hit God up for what we wanted, then run off until the next time we felt a twinge of need but never deepen that relationship. Spending more time in God's presence is really what we need.

I had a classmate in seminary whose favorite expression was "tarrying with the Lord." An old time word for "lingering." Perhaps God's intention is that we come with small requests, but leave with far more, as a result of tarrying. The by-product of our persistence is communion with God. As God says "You will find me when you seek me with all of your heart."

Second, sometimes we come to God with our request and we do not get an immediate answer, we return with the request but more urgently. The longer we do without what we need, the more we are aware of its importance to us, until maybe like Jacob we say "I will not let you go until you bless me." By delaying answers perhaps God creates a greater desire for that thing. Prayer helps enlarge our desires.

It also helps us clarify them. It may be that God withholds answers to some of our prayers so that over time we come to see that what we were so sure we wanted and needed, has somehow faded in its appeal. Or that a healthy expression of "someone needs it more" is God's inspiring us to pray for and long for what our neighbor needs. Imagine if the unjust judge had been guided by that.

And finally, though we don't want to hear it in an "instant gratification" world, sometimes it's not bad to live with a little mystery. Paul writes in Romans: "How unsearchable are God's judgments and how fathomless God's ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been God's counselor." (Romans 11:34-35).

God's ways are not always revealed and God does not answer the "why?" questions as much as I'd like. I imagine you feel the same. Yet we cannot see at once all that God does, and that is probably for the best. And so we too must live with mystery in this regard. We may never know why some prayers are postponed. Paul also writes in First Corinthians, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known." (1 Cor. 13:12-13)

And so I want to close with a story about that living into the mystery. Eighty years ago, much of the world lived in mystery. In Great Britain, King George VI faced a great crisis in December of 1939. War was on all shores as Hitler and Nazism spread and threatened to bring on a new dark age. Knowing he needed to speak a word of encouragement to his people, the King read this poem:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
"give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied, "go into the darkness
and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be better to you than light
and safer than a known way."

So I went forth and finding the hand of God
trod gladly into the night,
and he led me towards the hills
and the breaking of the day..."

(David N. Ashton, quoting a "Mrs. Harkins")

Prayer can be like this- treading into the unknown, but trusting that the heart of our God is not hardened, cold and uninvolved. God's heart abounds with love for us. And God is more like the wise parent who wants to train us up in faith so that instead of losing heart, we expand our hearts.

May we continue in the things we have learned, believing we who are dedicated to God are equipped for this life. Even when we do not understand why answers to our prayers are delayed, or adjusted, may we continue put our hand into God's hand. To trust in God's heart and align ours. And may we continue in faith to pray for those things we know to be God's will, trusting in God's providing.