

October 17, 2004

"An Ultimate Promise"

Luke 18:1-8

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## INTRODUCTION

What comes to your mind when you hear the word, prayer? Do you feel a shiver of guilt and think, "Oh, I should pray more?" Or do you remember moments in your life when things were so uncertain or so difficult that all you could think to do was to pray? Perhaps you remember days of desperation when you prayed fervently and received no response. This remembered disappointment with prayer reminds me of the story of a rancher in Wyoming named, Jake. It seems that Jake was fixing fences and lingered too long too far from home when a fierce blizzard descended on the area. When Jake tried to start his truck the battery failed and Jake was found frozen to death some days after the storm had subsided. We find Jake talking about all of this with St. Peter and complaining that God didn't answer his prayer to start the truck or to bring help. I want to share St. Peter's fabled reply to Jake...

Peter listened very patiently and when Jake was done, there were smiles of recognition, and he said, 'so you're the one!'

That day your truck, it would not start, and you sent your prayer a flying, you gave us all a real bad time, with hundreds of us trying.

A thousand angels rushed, to check the status of your file, but you know, Jake, we hadn't heard from you in quite a long while.

And though all prayers are answered, and God ain't got no quota, He didn't recognize your voice, and started a truck in Minnesota.

Of course, I know that there are some of you who could tell your experience of prayer, when you reached out in need for self or for another and your prayer was answered beyond all deserving and without any shadow of a doubt.

This morning I invite you to think with me about prayer. It is a word that has endless possible meanings, I know. But for today, I suggest that we think about prayer as "an ultimate promise" to a people who bond in seeking that Gracious Reality revealed supremely in Jesus Christ.

## PRAYER AND JESUS

Prayer was an integral part of Jesus' everyday life. Jesus at prayer is a frequent and very important image in the Gospel's reporting of his life. For instance, in Luke's Gospel, from which we have read this morning, we find Jesus prayerful at his baptism (3:21) before choosing his disciples (6: 12), before the first discussion of his coming suffering and death (9:18), and at that amazing moment shared with Peter, James and John called the transfiguration (9:28), among other occasions. For Jesus prayer was like eating, walking, sleeping – in fact it is difficult to think about Jesus without reflecting on this holy habit of prayerfulness, which for him was not only a discipline but as natural as peanut butter and jelly are to many of us.

## THE NAGGING WIDOW STORY – Luke 18:1-8

In this 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel we have a story which Jesus told to encourage his followers, or as the Gospel says, "...a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart..." (vs 1) "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent'. For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God

and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says, And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you he will quickly grant justice to them...'"

In other words, my understanding of this story encourages me to claim that if the unjust judge finally relents and responds to the widow's persistence, how much more readily will God, the compassionate source of all goodness, respond to the practiced persistence of those who seek!

So let this parable be for us a promise of God's ultimate faithfulness as we cry out, reach deep within, practice faithfully together the joyous business and arduous work of prayer.

#### THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF PRAYER

Let's be honest, first of all. Sometimes prayer has been a disappointment. Who here has not cried out in desperation only to have felt the vast emptiness of an echo?

Some months ago in the NY Times there was an article about the state of religious practice in Europe. As many of us know the state of worship attendance throughout European countries, with some extraordinary exceptions, is at an all time low. The Times surveyed many people about why they no longer, if ever, attended worship. One reason among many that was brought up time and again, articulated in various ways, was the simple fact that many saw prayer as irrelevant and useless. "It seems that once people stopped having the faith that fuels prayer, suddenly the whole of the Christian life withered and looked out-of-date. Once you've given up on prayer, then going to church looks about as futile as a vegetarian going to a (steak dinner). What's the sense? There's nothing for you there anyway." ("Lectionary Homiletics," Vol. XV, number 6, p.33)

If you have ever felt that way please know that you are not alone. I can think of nothing more discouraging to the work of faith and prayer than the feeling that my disappointments are mine alone. As someone has said, "losing hope often comes when we succumb to isolation and the belief that we alone have experienced God's absence and indifference." This is one powerful awareness that many of you, who have been or are presently part of a small group of seeking Christians, have discovered. There is great encouragement and comfort in knowing that we are part of a community of understanding and acceptance – never alone in our experiences, good or bad.

If you go to our church's website this week you will find, hopefully, printed versions of my messages for the past two weeks. In the printed message for World Communion Sunday you will find a little story that my friend Woody Hasty told in a sermon he preached several years ago in Naples, F. As it turned out I did not have time that morning to tell you the story. But, I cannot resist today. It is a story about a friend from MN who was making a first trip to Florida. He and his wife were in a little restaurant in Northern Fl. one morning for breakfast. The man saw something on the menu called "grits." Being from MN he, of course knew what lefsa and lutefisk were, but he had never heard about grits. So, he asked the waitress, "Mam, just what exactly is a grit?" Her response was not at all unusual for that part of the country. She said, "Honey, grits don't come by themselves."

I remember Woody saying something then, like, "grits don't exist in isolation. No grit is an island, entire unto itself. Every grit is a part of the mainland, a piece of the whole." You can't order a single grit. They're a package deal...And so is the Christian experience. Christians don't come by themselves!

#### THE UTTER IMPORTANCE OF PERSISTENCE AND REPETITION

Let's return to Jesus' story. Jesus was so insightful about the realities of our human natures. He saw and understood how easily we are discouraged, how often we simply lose heart. So he encouraged his followers and encourages us to be persistent. Not that we need to beat on God to get response, but that there is something very important for us in persistence and repetition.

Kathleen Norris in her book Dakota, tells of her loss and recovery of faith. She says, "If I had to find one word to describe how belief came to take hold of me, it would be 'repetition.' Like the widow in Jesus' story who would give the judge no rest until he granted her petition, Norris discovered the reward of persistence.

A clergy colleague tells about an elderly teacher/preacher who interpreted our parable of the morning in this way: "Until you've stood for years knocking at a locked door with bloody knuckles, you don't really know how to pray! Yet living as a Christian in the world is to experience all of the frustration of delay and silence in the prayer requests we make. Ask Jesus, especially when he prays in the Garden amid the drops of blood...For faith, if it's really faith, lives with the limits, settles down with the silence, knocks until its knuckles bleed, and then trusts that on the other side of the door, there is Someone who knows its name." (from a sermon by R. Wayne Stacy)

Jesus ends this parable with a question for us: "When the Son of Man comes on earth, will he find such faith?" ...Such faith which persists, stretching our human resolve to its very limits, testing our determination to do our part as people of faith.

After all, what good is a faith life, or prayer attitude, which tells God what is needed and then sits back passively waiting for God to intervene, abrogating the unique identity of human will? I think of Desmond Tutu who said something like this: "...Without our participation God will not. Without God's participation we can not..."

#### HOW SHOULD WE PRAY AND WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY ABOUT?

This morning I first suggest that prayer is not only a cry of desperation, like the sailors in Shakespeare's last play, "The Tempest," who cried in chorus, "All is lost! All is lost! To prayer! To Prayer!" Although it is often in desperation that we reflexively reach out for the help of some deity, known or unknown.

I would suggest this day that we focus on what Richard Foster calls "simple prayer." Listen to Foster now:

We bring ourselves before God just as we are,  
warts and all.

Like children before a loving father, we open our hearts  
and make our requests.

We do not try to sort out the good from the bad...We tell God, for example, how  
frustrated we are with the co-worker at the office  
or the neighbor down the street. We ask for food,  
favorable weather, and good health...

Simple prayer is bringing the things that are really in our mind, on our heart into a conversation with the promised presence of an understanding, accepting, befriending God. Often that may seem terribly trivial or self-centered, but it is a matter of being real with ourselves and with God. We pray about what is really on our hearts not about what we might wish was in our hearts.

Listen to Dallas Willard: "Prayer simply dies from efforts to pray about 'good things.' ...things that honestly do not matter to us. The way to get to meaningful prayer for those good things is

to start by praying for what we are truly interested in. The circles of our interests will inevitably grow in the largeness of God's love...Many people have found prayer impossible because they thought they should only pray for wonderful but remote needs they actually had little or no interest in or even knowledge of."

Of course, we would like to grow so that our concerns become increasingly less selfish. But prayer – like any other relationship–must begin in honesty if it is to grow. C.S. Lewis wrote that in prayer we must "lay before (God) what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

Now, I sense that many of you are way ahead of me in this. You have discovered for yourselves or you have discovered in the rich relationship of Cursillo fellowship or Koinonia Groups the powerful importance of praying simply and honestly.

#### PRAYER AS RELATIONSHIP

Wherever you are in your understanding or experience of prayer I draw us to conclude with what I have learned to call the ultimate promise of prayer. That promise is a living relationship with a Reality which sustains, nurtures, challenges and is with us whether we know it or not.

Again, Richard Foster writes so helpfully about the gift, joy, promise and yes, the discipline of prayer. This I found in John Ortberg's book, The Life You've Always Wanted. (p. 106) He tells about, "a friend waling through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The boy was cranky and out of sorts, and nothing the father did would settle him down.

"When nothing else works the father finally picks his son up, holds him in his arms, and begins to sing to him a song that he makes up as he goes along: 'I love you. I love the way you laugh. I'm glad I get to be your dad.'

"Suddenly this song does what nothing else could. He son's eyes get wide, his mouth closes and grins, he nestles into his father's chest and listen all the way out to the car.

'When his father puts him into the car seat and buckles him in, his son throws out his arms and say, 'Sing it to me again, Daddy. Sing it again.'

"Prayer is like that. With simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let him sing his love song over us."

#### CONCLUSION

When we pour out our hearts; when we simply persist in seeking God's sustaining help and guidance...sooner or later (who can understand or promise understanding God's wondrous ways) there will come that song and those everlasting, undergirding arms gathering us into the very heart of God. It is the ultimate promise of the faith which draws us together this very day. Amen.