

If you have ever listened to country music you may be familiar with a popular song written by Garth Brooks entitled, *Some of God's Greatest Gifts are Unanswered Prayers*. This song tells the story of a man who returns to his old high school with his wife at his side, and runs into an "old flame" who captured his heart when he was a youngster. He recalls his fervent prayers to God for that high school sweetheart to be his chosen partner and recognizes the gift that God gave him instead in his wife. The message rings true for all of us, that many times what we believe to be unanswered prayer is actually a gift of mercy from God beyond our sight or comprehension in the moment. How often do we ask for things that are not God's will for us and then believe that God hasn't heard our prayers because we didn't get the result we had hoped?

What this song implies is that God is at work watching over us, guiding and protecting us, in spite of ourselves, answering in unexpected ways. We may recognize God's hand in our lives in hindsight or because we are in relationship to God and we know God to be compassionate and just. Our prayer life establishes this relationship to God and opens the way for faith. It is easy in this world to lose heart when we can't discern God's active presence. How then do we persevere in the midst of trouble trusting that God hears our cries? How do we hope?

We can look to our lessons for the last several weeks to see where Jesus is leading us. We have been traveling in the gospel of Luke with Jesus towards Jerusalem, listening to parables and teachings along the way about the coming kingdom of God and the need for faith. These stories are meant to challenge our assumptions and to lead us in the establishment of kingdom values in our midst. But in Jesus' time this was a dangerous journey, confronting the powerful and comforting the afflicted. Ultimately it would lead Jesus to the cross where the one who is power would pour out his life and mercy for humanity's sake. As we walk this journey of faith with Jesus we witness a God who can understand our troubles and has compassion for our suffering.

Just before today's passage, Jesus told his disciples that a time was coming where the son of man would not be with them and they would endure persecution. He was preparing them for a time where they would not see or hear a direct response from God. Faith in God's justice and mercy would have to sustain them. Persevering prayer would be their resource and refreshment. And so he tells them the parable of the unjust judge and the widow highlighting the oppression of their society's power imbalances and how God's mercy and justice prevail. Luke tells us up front that Jesus' purpose is to tell his disciples to pray always and never lose heart. But then he tells a story that seemingly has nothing to do with prayer.

It is a tale of a poor widow who seeks justice in the courts but will not be heard by an unjust judge who neither fears God nor respects people. I imagine he was like many of the leaders of Jesus' day who abused their power and position at the expense of the poor. The widow epitomized the powerless in Judean society with no financial or legal resources and as a woman she was of the lowest social class. The widow does not lose hope but perseveres until the judge for his own relief capitulates and hears her case. The Greek translation says he relents because she is giving him a "black eye." Can't you just picture this little woman coming up and socking the judge in the eye for his injustice? If the unjust judge grants vindication how much more will our Lord who is compassionate and cares for his children give justice and mercy?

So is this story telling us we are to relentlessly pester God until God gives in like the unjust judge? I think rather that Jesus is challenging us to a life of prayer and relationship with God that involves asking, seeking and waiting. Waiting...this is particularly difficult in our culture that has set a precedent of instant gratification. In an age of high speed internet, cell phones and instant messaging, we are accustomed to speedy answers and have grown impatient. We are particularly at risk for losing heart because our ability to persevere has been compromised by conflicting demands and misplaced priorities. In our busyness we not only forget to pray but we also lose sight of the everyday injustices before us.

As I think back on my summer experience in Honduras at Our Little Roses Orphanage, I shutter at the injustices those girls have already experienced in their young lives. And yet they are filled with gratitude and joy for life. One might wonder how they persevere but their faith in Jesus is plain to see and how it upholds them in their lives. Jesus is telling us that it profits **us** to persist in our prayers for God's intervention because prayer **changes** us, and our priorities. God already knows our hearts and our needs and as we persevere in relationship to God our faith grows and we find hope.

Jurgen Moltmann, a contemporary theologian and former German military officer, wrote in his book *A Theology of Hope* of his powerful conversion to Christianity while in a prison camp. As he confronted the atrocities of his country's past and encountered God's mercy through Jesus Christ he was transformed. As a young soldier his home lay in ruins and his life looked no different. Surrounded by barbed wire, he felt abandoned by God and his hope had died. An American chaplain placed a Bible in his hands and he began to read and pray and was possessed by a hope and peace that he could not explain. His early companionship with Jesus, his brother in suffering and liberator from guilt, never left him. Moltmann found that prayer opened his eyes to the God who is with the broken-hearted and who would deliver him from bondage.

I could imagine that his prayer might have been “God free me from this prison.” God heard his pleas and he was freed from the bondage of his past. Perhaps that was not the answer he was expecting! Moltmann’s experience influenced his notion that we must “rub our souls raw on the barbed wire of oppression” and when he left prison he began a career of working for social change. As he sat in the tension of his despair and hope God heard his cries and Jurgen’s heart was healed.

The power of our gospel parable today is that it speaks to us on many levels. If we have experienced times in our lives where we have cried out to God and have not felt God’s presence, we can be comforted that our God who knows suffering and is compassionate hears us and will respond in God’s time. We may be challenged to look for the unexpected ways that God is answering our prayers and to continue seeking, knocking and waiting in faith.

If we are honest some of us may be more like the judge than the widow, where our challenge is to learn to acknowledge God and deepen our empathy for others. Those of us who have grown apathetic to injustices or have trouble seeing beyond our own needs may take from this story God’s desire for us to be moved by compassion and to put our faith in action. Then this parable is a call for us to re-align with Gods kingdom values and seek justice for those who are suffering.

No matter where we stand in this story, whether we seek God's justice or God's mercy there is a word of hope for us. Jesus was the judge who became our companion. God has already taken our side and stands with and for us. Our compassionate companion knows our suffering and hears our cries. When we persevere in prayer and relationship, we are strengthened in our faith and knowledge of God. Interestingly in our lectionary reading the very last line of this chapter was omitted and for me it elucidates God's desire for us. The last line says, "And yet, when the son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will Jesus find faith in each of us? Will Jesus find faith in this community of believers through our actions? As we pray "thy will be done" may God grant us a restless heart that drives us towards kingdom values, love of our neighbors and a desire to increase our faith. Amen.