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Praying Boldly  
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash  
October 20, 2019

Text  
Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' 4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" 6And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

From our text this morning: Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

I am part of a clergy group that has been meeting monthly in various configurations for over a decade. We have been through it all together, personal and ministerial. Monthly conversations are not enough for us, so now we have a private Slack Channel where we check in daily. On the night I walked into Pilgrim Church for the first time, I felt the power of my covenant group's prayers because my they told me they would be praying for me and the search committee and I know it was true.

This spring, one of our members' 9 year old son Gabe had what everyone thought were growth pains, until the doctor said, osteosarcoma. And then we really started praying. We were not the only ones, of course - Gabe's whole congregation, whole town, strangers who see his face in a Jimmy Fund fun-run picture, and several Boston Bruins - this child has a vast network of people praying for him.

But, with the permission of Gabe's mom, I want to talk to you about our experience of prayer as a group.

We were sharing preaching notes on the man in Luke 11, who will not stop bugging his neighbor. He will not stop knocking (doesn't this sound like our widow) and Jesus says, "...because of his persistence" his friend will give him what he needs. The Greek there is closer to, because of his shamelessness, the need would be met. Our group named this as the way we would pray for Gabe.

We prayed shamelessly, boldly, demandingly, for Gabe during his first surgery. We stormed heaven and earth. Without shame we named what we wanted for Gabe, and we knelt before God. With the Psalmist we shouted, "Answer me when I call, O God!" (Psalm 4:1) And we sat with Cheryl and her husband in the hospital praying without ceasing and we did not lose heart.

Right now, I want you to know, Gabe is midway through a year of treatment, he's made it through two surgeries with one to go, and he is up and walking and going to school some days.

I tell you that because I do not want you to wonder how he is.

But, you should know something about what I meant and believed as I prayed shamelessly and called out in prayer for Gabe's healing.

I did not believe that if enough people pray long enough and boldly enough, that God would wondrously intervene and physically heal Gabe. To believe that God would do so, I would also have to believe that God chooses some people to be healed and some people to stay sick, chooses some people to live and some people to die. That is not the God that I believe in. I also do not believe that God chose for Gabe to be sick in the first place. The God I believe in is all-merciful, the source of love, the source of wisdom and compassion and kindness. Childhood cancer comes from a complex combination of environmental factors, genetic predisposition and randomness. But God does not cause cancer.

Why, then, have I prayed so hard, so boldly, for Gabe? And for many others?

For that, I have to dive into the widow's story from this morning.

Why did Jesus say, pray always and do not lose heart, and why did he hold up this widow as a model for his followers?

Jesus told this parable on the way to Jerusalem, and it was written down several decades later. The texts of the Christian Bible were written down in an anxious time. There was an expectation that Jesus would come again, soon, so the future was deeply uncertain. Jesus's followers were experiencing persecution. Jesus, or the author of Luke, wanted to prepare Christians for the waiting time, the challenge, the messy middle between Easter and Jesus' return. Don't lose heart, Jesus said, when the way is hard and the future is uncertain.

So Jesus lifts up the example of a determined widow. In the Bible, widows are vulnerable and often destitute, and set aside for special protection, and most definitely they occupy a special place in God's own heart. Generally, they're not superheroes. But there are a number of bold and brave widows in the Bible, who will not let their vulnerable state stop them. Think of Tamar, and Ruth and Naomi. The widow of Luke 18 is one of them. She will not stop seeking what she needs. She is strong and she is a survivor. She is indeed so tenacious, so brave that is her unstoppable determination that leads to the result she wants. The judge gives in to her demands, saying "because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." Here's the punchline, literally: in the Greek, it's something like, I will grant her justice so she won't give me a black eye.

So Jesus says,  
When you are in the midst of crisis,  
when you are facing injustice,  
when you do not know what is going to happen next,  
Pray always and do not lose heart.  
Pray like the widow who would not stop until she got justice.

And what is God like, in this parable? Jesus says that God is not like the unjust judge, capricious and out to protect himself. God loves us and listens and responds quickly. Brittany Wilson takes it a step further, in her reflection on this text: "God does not need to be badgered

into listening, and when God does respond, God does so willingly. If anything, God is more like the widow in her own relentless commitment to justice.”

God may not be moving pieces around on a chess board, but God is as committed to wholeness and justice as we are, and this is the God I cry out to in prayer. I call out to God who whispers wisdom in the ears of researchers and steadies the hand of surgeons. I call out to the source of strength and hope to lift up tired and worried parents. I call out to the divine Parent when I pray for a child.

And yet, and also, I have seen miracles and mysteries and exceptions to the rule often enough to leave room for wonder.

So with the Psalmists, and with the widow, and with Jesus himself, I am bold to pray honestly, authentically, shamelessly, to God, whose love knows no bounds and whose peace passes all understanding.

And my most authentic prayer for Gabe, my most honest one, is that he will live and thrive. So that is what I pray.

This, then, is what I believe about prayer.

Prayer is a practice of relationship. Prayer draws us closer to God’s love, and prayer is an expression of our care.

Praying for someone is one way that I can say, I see you. I see what you are going through, and I care, and I am willing to walk with you through this.

Praying for justice is one way that I can say, I see what is going on in the world, and I care. I am willing to work to make it better and I won’t stop calling out for justice.

If prayer is a sign of what we will work toward, I believe God’s response is a sign that God is working with us. “Our prayer life shapes us, and helps to align us with the intentions of God.” Prayer describes the story we want to live into and expresses hope for what can be. Hope, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, is active and brave and distinct from optimism: “Hope is the belief that we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope is an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it does need courage to hope.”

Prayer is also an opportunity to listen, to make space to hear God’s wisdom and receive God’s compassion and love.

I think the author of Hebrews must have had this parable in mind when writing, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

Let me tell you this, also. When I know you are going through some terrible illness, some great challenge:

When I say I will be praying for you, this is what I mean.

And I do believe in the power of prayer.

Amen.