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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24C)

October 16, 2016

Text: Luke 18:1–8

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus told a parable to His disciples for the purpose of encouraging them to pray continually and not lose heart. My guess is that all of us need encouragement to keep praying. In these gray and latter days, it's easy to lose heart. The devil, the world, and our sinful natures have not lost any of their potency to deceive, discourage, and frustrate. And yet the Lord Jesus says to us today, through His holy Word, to keep praying and to remain confident and bold. Or to put it differently, the Lord is strengthening us to remain faithful. For prayer is the living breathe of faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. Where there is faith in Jesus, there is prayer offered to His Father in His name through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The one always follows the other.

In order to encourage us to pray, the Lord Jesus tells a parable about a spunky widow and deadbeat judge. The judge “neither feared God nor respected man” (vs. 2). He was not a believer in God and he didn't really care about fulfilling his vocation of serving his fellow man with justice and righteousness. The widow had an adversary. There was only one source of justice for her: the unjust judge who didn't fear God and didn't care one lick about her situation. You can see the dilemma.

Everything stands against this widow. She's lost her husband; there's no family to defend and care for her. And the only person who has the power and authority to help her is a rotten scoundrel of a judge; he doesn't care about her or her situation in the least. The widow could throw up her hands, quit, and lose heart.

But vs. 3 says she kept going to the judge. Time and time again she appears in his court. Give me justice. Answer my plea. Deliver me from my adversary. Time and time again, the judge dismisses the widow with no answer. Until vs. 4, “For a while he (i.e., judge) refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” Finally, justice is served. The widow receives deliverance from her adversary.

And this is supposed to encourage us to pray?! Why yes, it is! We must hear the parable properly and focus on the right person in the parable. The judge isn't all that appealing to us. But he's the one we should focus on. That's the genius of the parable. The Lord Jesus draws our attention to the judge in vs. 6, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says..." What did he say? Vs. 4-5, "Though I neither fear God or respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continually coming." The judge does the right thing for all the wrong reasons.

The unrighteous judge is a perfect foil compared to our righteousness heavenly Father. In other words, the wickedness of the judge highlights all the more powerfully the goodness of our heavenly Father. They are polar opposites of each other. God our Father does the right things for all the right reasons. He graciously hears and answers our prayers. "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily" (vs. 7-8). Yes! The Lord hears the prayers of His beloved.

Now, it might be tempting to think that the success of our answered prayers lies in us being like the pesky widow from the parable. Didn't the judge say, "...because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming" (vs. 5). She just wore him down like a naughty child constantly nagging a parent until he gets what he wants. Did not Jacob prevail in his wrestling with God in today's OT reading? "I will not let you go unless you bless me" said Jacob (Gen. 32:26).

If we understand the parable with emphasis on the persistence of the widow, then the rest of this sermon might be a long exhortation on renewed prayer in our personal and congregational lives. New prayer groups could be formed today. Prayer chains, accountability groups, and seminars with highly trained experts might be useful resources to enhance our strategy of storming heaven with the effectual, fervent prayers of righteous men and women. These seminars could even specialize in intercessory prayer and spiritual warfare. Through pesky, incessant, constant prayer our congregation would grow numerically, new programs would emerge, more opportunities for witnessing, evangelism, and winning the lost might present themselves with greater regularity. If only we would keep praying to God in faith without losing heart, just like the widow in today's parable.

But in the end, who would we be trusting in all this? The God to whom we pray or ourselves and our persistent prayers? Too easily, prayer becomes another form of works-righteousness whereby we attempt to win God's favor and try to manipulate Him to giving us what we want when we want it. Hear me clearly now when I say that such a human-centered understanding of prayer is contrary to God's Word and Christ's Gospel. Prayer chains, prayer groups, various resources that help us with praying (i.e., Portals of Prayer, Treasury of Daily Prayer, our hymnals, and so forth), and classes that emphasize a true Biblical understanding of prayer are all good.

But the reason we don't lose heart, the reason we remain steady, even spunky in our prayer like the widow, is that we know to whom we are praying. We pray to God the Father almighty who gives His Son to save His people from the adversaries of sin, death, and the devil so that we might become living temples of His Holy Spirit. Our courage in prayer is found not in us or our faithfulness but in the God who loves us and answers our prayer for our good.

This is how Jesus applies the parable. Look again at vs. 7–8, “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” We pray fervently because we know, love, and trust in the God of our salvation. He's the reason we pray so devotedly.

And we know that this God of love and truth desires to hear His peoples' prayers because of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God the Father Almighty. Do you think that God the Father would send His Son to die on the cross to take away the sins of the world and fill them with His Holy Spirit so that He could then ignore His redeemed people? Of course not. The Father will give His people justice, the justice established in the death and resurrection of His Son. How in heaven and earth could the Father not hear your prayer? You are His baptized, redeemed, Holy Spirit-filled children who are near and dear to His heart. Take courage, dear saints, the Father delights in your prayers. You and all that you do is redeemed and made holy by God's Son through the Holy Spirit.

Every prayer you speak will be vindicated and answered. But we must take the long view of prayer. His death and resurrection and His promised return in glory provide the sure foundation that your petitions are answered. God the Holy Trinity has already acted decisively and powerfully on your behalf. He has already given His justice to you in and through Jesus.

On this side of eternity, you may not see any tangible evidence for answered prayers. But on the Last Day, your prayer will be vindicated for all creation to see. That's why we don't lose heart. We know who listens! That's the confident, never-lose heart sort of faith given to us in Jesus.

“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?” (vs. 8b). Our Lord's concluding question puts an end-times focus on prayer. Will we trust what God the Holy Trinity has spoken through Calvary's cross and given to us in our Baptism? Will we trust that God justifies sinners in Jesus so that all their prayers are heard and answered regardless of external circumstances or situations? Will Jesus find that kind of faith on earth?

The ministry of God's Word goes forth through His Church so that this saving faith may be established among us. Baptism is rightly administered. The Lord's Supper regularly and faithfully given. Absolution is offered to anyone desiring God's forgiveness. Preaching, prayer, and Bible study punctuate the weekly life of the Church. All these things happen so that this kind of justifying faith may be established among us. The answer to Christ's question is yes. This kind of Holy Spirit-inspired faith will be found on earth in Christ's holy Church. That kind of faith will be found here by God's grace!

We don't lose heart in our prayer or in anything else because Jesus Christ went to the cross and conquered our adversaries of sin, death and the devil. Our Father hears our prayers because of Jesus. Take heart! Our God hears our prayer and that quite speedily!!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.