October 20, 2013 – 22th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)

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I met a young woman not too long ago, who seems to have all the cards stacked against her. She's Native American, first of all, which means she's at quite a disadvantage already. She has three little children, whom she's raising alone because their father hasn't been able to leave his life of drugs and alcohol in order to take care of them, and she feared for their safety.

She has no money, no job, a barely working car, and even her shoes were stolen out of that same car. The father of her children has taken+ everything from her that he could sell, so she has no TV, no computer, no phone. And unlike many Native Americans, she has very little family. She never knew her father, and her mother died four years ago. She has a grandmother in Lower Brule, but that's about it.

But she, herself, doesn't have a drug or alcohol problem. Her kids are happy, clean, and well cared for, and doing well in school. She has a line on a part time job and a cousin to look after the children while she works. She has hope.

She has hope and she prays. Sometimes she prays through tears, and sometimes she prays without being able to articulate her fears and frustrations, but she still prays. She has faith. Faith in that same God who will grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night.

But sometimes, that faith is sorely tested, like when she left her purse with her electronic benefits card in Lower Brule and hasn't gotten it back yet. Sometimes it’s tested when she has exhausted all of her avenues for food or gas. She doesn't know how God is going to work things out for her, or even IF he's going to work things out for her. But still she prays.

She's kind of like the widow in our Gospel reading today. Unlike some of Luke's stories that cross the line between being a parable and being an event that happened, or could happen, this one is a pure parable. As Jesus' disciples were, we are meant to derive meaning for our own lives, and there are probably several things we can take away from this parable, but I want to focus on one of them – prayer.

The first thing Jesus tells his disciples straight out, before beginning his illustration is that they need to pray always and not lose heart. So what is the nature of prayer? What does it mean to pray always, and what does it mean to not lose heart while we're doing it?

We all know that God is not some cosmic vending machine, where if we insert enough prayer quarters we get out a package of Juicy Fruit and maybe a new job. But aren't most of our prayers petitions for something? "Oh God, can I please get that new job that would be perfect for me." Or, "Oh God, would you please keep so-and-so safe as he travels, or please heal thus-and-such of her cancer, etc. etc." We're always very polite, but we're often looking for some quid pro quo for our prayers.

And Jesus makes it clear with this parable that that is certainly part of praying, and not displeasing to God. The widow in this story positively harasses the judge, whom everyone in the town knows to be as crooked as a barrel of fish hooks. But crooked or no, he finally gives in to her pleas for vengeance because he's afraid she's going to come after him and do him harm. The NRSV translation is really tepid, compared to the word used in the Greek.

Our text says, "I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." The word translated as "wear me out" is *hupopiadzo*, which literally means to strike under the eye, to bruise, to treat severely, to discipline by hardship, to molest, to annoy, to harass, to worry, or to exhaust. I can just imagine this widow stalking the unjust judge, and lying in wait to pounce on him and whale on him with her handbag, all the while yelling, "Give me justice!" If YouTube were invented back then, that video would go viral!

Jesus’ point is not that the widow was a violent stalker, which after all might have just been all in the judge's guilty mind, but that she was persistent. Even facing a judge that everyone expected would do the wrong thing, she was persistent and finally her request was granted.

If this guy, who is a bad character, gives in to this widow's persistence, how much more will God, who is all loving, answer our persistent prayers? God will always be faithful to his own, and wishes for their faithfulness in response. Not in RETURN, in RESPONSE.

This is at the heart of the nature of prayer. Yes, we can ask for things, and yes, God answers prayers, but the real importance here is our relationship with God. THIS is why Jesus says to pray always. Not to bully God into giving us stuff, but to be in constant communication with him. To be in a two-way, healthy relationship with him. And one, very important way to achieve this is through praying. Prayer invites us to trust in the goodness and justice of God, and to become a part of that same goodness and justice.

But practically speaking, how do we pray always, as Jesus tells us to do? While I was looking at some blogs on stewardship and giving[[1]](#footnote-1), which, I have to say, are pretty thick on the ground during stewardship season, I came across one with some very practical suggestions on three ways to stop stressing about giving. As I read them, I realized that they could be applied to prayer as well. So as you hear this list, think about it both with an ear toward stewardship, because it’s that time of year, and toward prayer.

**1. Stop looking for that “magic moment”**

In the article on giving, the author talks about wanting an experience to accompany their giving – a warm fuzzy feeling for having done something good – and feeling somewhat cheated if it doesn't happen. The same can be said for prayer.

Some people might want or expect a euphoric feeling while praying, or some kind of spiritual sign that they're being heard. But often it doesn't work that way. Sometimes the silence is deafening and you get no indication that anything whatsoever is happening. Pray anyway and have faith that God is hearing your every need, your every joy, your every fear. In fact, something very powerful is happening indeed.

**2. Stop obsessing about the method**

Centering prayer or Ignatian Examen? On your knees or on your feet? Or on your back with the pillow over your head. Wait, did I pay full attention at Morning Prayer or at the Eucharist? Should I use Elizabethan English, or can God understand modern American? Out loud or silent. Book of Common Prayer or extemporaneous? And what the heck should I say?

Would it be discouraging to say that God doesn't care? Oh, he cares that you pray, all right, but the form doesn't matter in the slightest. Really. God is just interested in YOU. In hearing from you and being in a dialogue with you, even if it seems one sided. It's never one-sided because God is always there.

**3. Stop looking for the perfect causes**

This one really applies to giving, and how we give back in gratitude for all that God has giving us, but it can work for prayer, too. It's a very good thing to pray for things like peace and justice, but God is continually working toward those goals on earth even without us reminding him of those needs. And it's good to pray for each others' needs and well being, but, God is looking out for those things, too.

What prayer does in these circumstances, and all others, is connect us to each and every person on the planet. When we pray for someone, we are in communion with them. When we pray for our enemies, we are offering ourselves up in reconciliation – even if they don't take us up on that offer. And when we pray for peace and justice, we are giving ourselves to the service of those less fortunate than we are.

Praying for each other means being in relationship with each other, and since we're praying to God, we are also in relationship with him. It's one of the most powerful, subversive things to do in and for this sadly broken world of ours.

So pray. Pray always and don't lose heart. Have faith that prayer works. God really IS listening, and is inviting us into that perfect relationship of the Holy Trinity every single time we pray, and prayer really does work.

Amen.

1. <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/3-ways-stop-stressing-about-giving>, Anderson, Jeff, Relevant Magazine online, October 18, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)