

And Will Not God?

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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Luke 18:1-8



The judge is fast asleep, engorged on rich food, tipsy with wine, having completed a day dealing with people about whom he does not care in the name of a God he does not fear. He is roused from his passive slumbering by a knock at the door, at first he thinks he is dreaming and tries to roll over. But the knocking gets increasingly louder, accompanied by the familiar shouting of *that* woman. Again. Reluctantly, he gets up, puts on his slippers, and opens the door with contempt in his eyes.

“Give me justice!” she screams.

He says a few choice words, and slams the door in her face. He pads back down the hall, lies down, and is feeling the familiar descent of sleep when he hears her knocking, again, even more loudly.

Is this prayer? This incessant knocking?

Did great theologian and now Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan have it right all along when he sings, “Feels like I’m knock, knock, knocking on Heaven’s door, like so many times before...?” You recall the plaintive longing of that song, as Dylan’s protagonist begs his mama to take his badge from him, that it’s getting too dark to see; to wipe the blood from his face, he can’t see through it anymore; to lay his guns in the ground, because a long black cloud is coming down; all these cries punctuated with that over-and-over refrain, “knock, knock, knocking on Heaven’s door, like so many times before...”

Many know this kind of praying. Pray for the job and don’t get hired. Pray for health, and the disease persists. Pray for peace, but see images of desolation in Syria and the Sudan and the lack of peace on our own shores, in our own politics. Pray for families and find broken relationships continue. Knock, knock, knocking on Heaven’s door, and...nothing.

When we pray and the things for which we pray do not come to pass we can begin to think we aren’t worthy enough, or we aren’t doing enough, or we conclude that God is

not concerned for us. And each of these responses to seemingly unanswered prayer is spiritually deadening. We either think we have to work harder to earn God's favor, or we give up, since God seems not to care.

No wonder the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Luke's Gospel is more concerned with prayer than any other. Jesus is constantly teaching about the life of prayer, what it means to stand before God in prayer. Luke is writing his gospel fully two generations after Jesus' ministry. The church has been praying now for forty to fifty years, "Thy kingdom come," and it has not come. The church stands on the hillsides of Judea, Rome, Galatia, Ephesus, and other places, looking with longing eyes for the coming of Jesus, the fulfillment of the promises, the establishment of God's kingdom, for their faith to be vindicated, and it has not yet happened. To this waiting church, Jesus says, "Do not lose heart."

If we look at the totality of Jesus' teaching on prayer, we can see how limited our understanding of prayer can be. I fear too many of us look at prayer the way the comedian Flip Wilson talked about it:

"I'm gonna pray now. Anybody want anything?"

You see football players on the sidelines as the kicker prepares to kick what could be the winning field goal, some of them on their knees, heads down, pleading with God, knocking on Heaven's door, and, if they win, saying, "I just want to give Jesus all the glory for this win," as if Jesus has something against the other team. Vanderbilt must be a godless den of iniquity, according to this logic, and the Holy of Holies is located in Tuscaloosa.

While it may be low-hanging fruit to snicker at these examples, they point to a larger phenomenon of viewing prayer as primarily a one-way street – we ask and God answers, we speak and God listens. But such a view of prayer only skims the surface of prayer as Jesus teaches it. Rather than a thing we do on the occasion when we are most in need, Jesus offers prayer as a way of life, a continual posture before the door of Heaven, and, importantly, a posture of listening, silence, and alignment of our vision with the vision of God.

Perhaps the woman in the parable is knocking and knocking, praying and praying, until she, as one writer puts it, she "is being formed through long days and nights of prayer into a vessel that will be able to hold the answer when it comes." Perhaps we've been looking at prayer from the wrong perspective. We believe we can somehow,

through our prayers, change God, when it just may be that God uses our prayers to change us.

Poet Mary Oliver writes, “Attention is the beginning of devotion...Something is wrong, I know it, if I don’t keep my attention on eternity.” Her life as a poet has been in service of the kind of attention in the here-and-now that becomes prayer. And no poem of her captures this spirit better than the one called, simply, “Prayer.”

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together, and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

Attention is the “doorway to thanks,” a “silence in which another voice may speak.” The goal of prayer is not so much to speak as to listen; not so much to frantically tick off all the things we need as to create space, within and without, for that other voice to speak.

The woman in the parable is pounding on the door of the unjust judge, demanding his attention to her cries. Imagine, asks Jesus, how much more God, who longs for justice, will hear our cries. Indeed, God is attentive to us long before we are attentive to God, long before we speak, long before we knock, the God we worship is already speaking, already opening the door, fully present to us as we present ourselves to God.

I met Bill, a thirty-two-year-old father of three, on the eighth floor of the then Baptist Hospital in Nashville. I was twenty-four years old, a second year divinity school student, and had chosen to work as a chaplain on the oncology floor for my field education.

The doctors had given him a year, maybe two, if he went through chemotherapy; no more than a month if he did not. He had gone through his rounds of chemo and had shrunk to around seventy pounds when he was admitted to Baptist. The chemo was

killing him faster than the cancer. He had decided to stop treatment. The family was called in, and the chaplain was summoned. That was me.

His three boys were in the room. The oldest was ten. They were sitting close to him on the bed. His wife was standing at the end. His parents were there, a few friends. All these people, all of whom had prayed harder than they had ever prayed before for Bill's healing, were standing in the presence of the surest evidence that their prayers had not been answered in the way they desired. And now I entered the room as the representative of this silent, absent God. None of them said this, but their body language, their eyes, the way they avoided speaking to me, told me all I needed to know.

I said some words, prayed a perfunctory prayer, said I would continue thinking about, and got out of there as fast as I could. I was ashamed of myself for walking into such a tragic situation, into such mystery and pathos, armed with the equivalent of a spiritual Band-Aid.

Later that week, when I met with my supervisor, I reluctantly told him about that visit, expressing my dismay that I didn't have anything useful to say.

"Forget about what you said. What did you feel?" he asked me.

"I felt like this was unfair, that these kids should have to sit there and watch their father die was not right. I felt..."

"Angry," he said, finishing my thought. "Yes, I guess that's what I felt...and helpless." He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "I wonder what it might have looked and sounded like for you to have expressed your anger and helplessness to God in the presence of that family?"

It was comments like those that made me hate supervision. Because, of course, what that would have done would be to show I was paying attention to them, and creating space for us to come to attention before a God who bears us up *as we are*, however we feel, in whatever circumstances. And maybe, just maybe, in that moment of attention, we could have experienced a silence in which another voice could speak.

It is finally out of sheer exasperation with her persistence that the judge grants the woman's request in the parable. And the God we serve is no unjust judge, but the One whose voice speaks in grace even here, even now. The parable, as all parables, is a call to listen to another voice not our own, and a promise that in the listening itself is life beyond what we could have imagined when we began to pray. Do not lose heart. Amen.