

By Deb Richardson-Moore

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Luke 18: 1-8

Prayer: Dear Lord, We pray to gain understanding of your Word. Make us discerning. Make us wise. Then make us bold. We pray in the name you wore while teaching, Amen.

When You Pray, Move Your Feet

Nine years ago, when the Greyhound bus station was still downtown, a man arrived and walked to Triune. He met me on the sidewalk right after church on a Sunday in early June.

He said he had come all the way from California, and he was trying to locate his daughter. But he'd lost her address, and all he knew was that she was in South Carolina.

Here was his request: Could he use Triune as a return address to write to family back in California and have them mail him his daughter's address? *Well, sure, I told him. But that sounds awfully complicated. Not to mention, slow.*

We talked for awhile and he mentioned that his daughter was on Facebook. So he and I went to my office, typed in her name and Facebook, and she popped right up. We left her a message with the church's phone number.

The next day, the daughter called from Rock Hill. She was thrilled to hear her dad was in town, and she drove down and picked him up. End of story.

Some of you have heard me tell this story before. The reason that I remember it nine years later is it may be the only time in my tenure here that a problem was solved in two days.

Solved. Completed. Handled. Finished. Taken care of.

One time in 14 years.

Far more often, someone will say he needs a box of groceries or a shelter bed or a prescription filled or a pair of shoes or clothes washed or a job or diapers. But when we begin exploring, the problems are horribly entangled – like a giant ball of knotted string. A solution would take years – if, indeed, a “solution” is even possible.

One of the reasons we started Round Table and Triune Circles is that so many of the people we see have problems that cannot be addressed in an afternoon or a week or a month. When you're talking about a single mom with

three children and no home and no car and no high school diploma, it's going to take some time to work through the issues.

The collection of problems – because it's never just one – can form a wall that seems insurmountable. Very often, a single person faces problems with illness, tooth decay, mental health, addiction, housing, transportation, education, employment, childcare and the legal system.

Some of the problems are of their own making. And some are results of a society that can stack the deck against the poor.

The result is that the relatively tame world that the rest of us inhabit can seem like a blank, forbidding wall with no footholds for those on the margins.

It was the same in the ancient world. That's why the Bible speaks so often of the widow and the orphan. That was shorthand for those vulnerable citizens who were left without the protection of society.

So the Bible instructs the people of God – first the Jews in the Old Testament, then the Christians in the New Testament – to care for them.

As we know, nobody sang that song louder than the gospel writer Luke. That's the setting for today's curious little parable. As we read it, look at the

helplessness of this main character, the widow. And look at how Jesus sets up this judge to represent the pinnacle of unfairness and corruption.

Please turn in your Bibles to **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,*⁵ yet 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.

Now I hate whining. Whining sends shudders up my back. It makes me a little crazy.

I used to tell my children, “I cannot listen to you until you get that whine out of your voice.”

Some day I’m going to have to stand before God and admit I’ve said the same thing to people in my office.

Well, this parable sounds like Jesus condones whining. The widow wore the judge slap out. He admits it. He gave in not out of justice but because she was “bothering” him.

What in the world?

This is one of the few parables that is introduced with an explanation. Luke telegraphs what it’s about before we even read it.

“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”

So it truly is about persistence in prayer. I’m not going to argue with Luke and tell you it’s about something else.

In fact, this persistence parable has a partner in the 11th chapter of Luke.

This second parable comes right after Jesus instructs the disciples in the Lord's Prayer. Here it is:

5 And (Jesus) said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him."⁷And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything."

⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

9 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

We call these “how much more” parables. If these rather unlikeable characters – a stingy, sleepy friend, an unjust judge – can come around and give good gifts, *how much more* can our loving God do so?

So that’s one way to read these parables. A decent way.

But as so often happens when Jesus and Luke get together, I think there’s something more going on. And it has to do with economics and justice.

“In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.”

A judge who doesn’t fear God is a fool, according to the psalms. By definition, something is terribly wrong with this judge. His foundation is cracked. He is corrupt. He has no moral center. He is the face of a cold, uncaring society spoken against by every prophet recorded in the Old Testament.

“In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ”

As I said, this widow is shorthand for a vulnerable person. She has no standing. She has no power. The legal system is arrayed against her.

There is an African proverb that says: **“When you pray, move your feet.”**

When you pray, move your feet.

This is what the widow is doing. This representative of a disempowered segment of society is speaking out – loudly and repeatedly– against the powers that be. All she has is persistence. And it is enough.

For ultimately the judge said, **“Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”**

That’s where the parable ends. Then Jesus chimes in with an explanation: **“... will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”**

So, OK, point one: Persistence in prayer. But why? It seems as if prayer worked, we wouldn’t have to be told to persist, would we? We have to be told to persist because, so often, we can’t tell that prayer is working.

But is it? Does, perhaps, the real answer to prayer come not in a changed situation ... but in a changed person who prays?

Does the real answer to prayer come in the change to the person who prays?

We always say here at Triune that true ministry is about relationship. Not donor-recipient. But a level field. Relationship is when each partner brings something of value to the table.

Relationship is what changes a person. Relationship is what lifts someone out of poverty.

Well, what is prayer but relationship? A relationship between us and God.

And so if we are in persistent, consistent prayer, what does that say about us? It says we are in relationship with our God.

So regardless of what is happening in our earthly situations, isn't that relationship a good place to be?

I think that's the persistence point of the parable.

The second point is the African proverb: *When you pray, move your feet.*

Because eventually, our actions will follow our prayers. The widow spoke truth to a powerful judge. When we pray, we are looking for signs, open doors, opportunities to affect the change we seek.

Maggi Dawn is an Anglican priest in England. She sees this parable as a call to activism, and sees its echo in the great social movements – such as the abolition of the slave trade in Great Britain 200 years ago.

William Wilberforce was a member of British Parliament who had a powerful religious conversion. Afterward, he set his mind to various justice issues, including the abolition of slavery.

He faced obstacles from slave-holding colleagues. He faced serious illnesses that confined him to bed for weeks at a time. But for 20 years, he prayed and he worked through the obstacles until finally Great Britain outlawed the slave trade.

Rev. Dawn sees two things going on in the Wilberforce story and in the widow's story. "One is that constant prayer shapes the person who prays," she says.

And two is that "the widow's story connects prayer with public action.... Prayer as Jesus taught it isn't just a private matter. It's not personal therapy or a crutch for the weak.

"Prayer is about refusing to believe that the way things are has to be the way they will always be, about imagining how the world could be, and gaining the wisdom and the energy to bring it about."

On this side of the pond, preacher Fred Craddock said he was once in a large crowd who had gathered to address inequalities in society. An elderly black

preacher read this parable of the unjust judge and gave a one-sentence interpretation: “Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.”

Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.

Are we truly praying for justice? Or are we concerned only with our personal petitions?

At Triune, we see a lot of grandparents raising grandchildren because of addiction in the generation in between.

Years ago, I spoke with a grandmother who was dismayed because she saw her daughter living with various men, using drugs and moving the grandchild from school to school. She called the Department of Social Services twice, trying to get them to intervene. Both times, DSS investigated but took no action.

Then the mother took off and left the child with the grandmother. But in order to get what she wanted, she kept threatening to take the child back to live in a motel and start the cycle all over.

I contacted a colleague who had worked for DSS for many years. I asked her advice on what to do in situations like that.

And she actually said, “You know the parable of the unjust judge? That’s what you do. You call DSS and you call a caseworker and you call a supervisor and you call the director. You keep calling until they do what needs to be done.”

That is persistence, yes. If you’re DSS, it’s probably “bothering” you, too. But it is also moving your feet. It’s also action.

I think that’s what this parable is telling us. Be persistent in prayer, yes. And be persistent in seeking justice. Take action to achieve that justice.

You know, I get all kinds of emails and notifications about rallies and protests and meetings and vigils and ways in which our fellow citizens are speaking out. And I’m always thrilled when I see Triune parishioners and our JustFaith friends on those front lines:

Speaking out against racism and mass incarceration. (In the next few weeks, you will hear about our own Amy Sutherland’s work to acknowledge the lynchings that took place in Greenville County in the 20th century.)

I’m thrilled when I hear them speaking out for the environment.

Speaking out for commonsense gun laws.

Speaking out for public transportation and affordable housing.

Speaking out for immigration reform that allows work and doesn't separate families.

Speaking out against our leaders when they lie.

There may be 200 people attending an event, or there may be 20, or there may be five. Or there may be only the lonely widow crying out for justice.

But Scripture tells us it is worth doing.

It is worth moving our feet.

Amen.