

Alternative to Despair

sermon digest

November 3, 2013

Luke 18:1-8

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After years of visiting doctors only at the point of absolute necessity, my wife convinced me that because of advancing age, I should start getting an annual physical examination. I was about fifty-five. I made the appointment. When Dr. Blount came into the examining room, he wanted to know what was wrong. I assured him that nothing obvious was wrong. I felt fine; and, as far as I could tell, I was in perfect health. Truth be told, I was only there at the insistence of my wife. I vividly recall the doctor's poetic response: "Well, you know what they say, 'A nagging wife will save your life!'" I could not wait to get home to tell Carolyn about my visit to the nice doctor.

Wives have long been the stereotypical nags, the brunt of jokes across the boundaries of time and culture. The rationale is not so difficult to grasp. As far back as memory can reach, women have lived on the lower rungs of family and legal authority. If a woman needed or wanted anything, she was at the total mercy of husband, father, brother, or judge. The power of asking, pleading, and nagging became the only recourse. Within the scope of my life, I have witnessed significant changes in legal standing and an improvement in gender equality. I recall as a very young pastor my first encounter with the idea that women might be deacons or pastors. I laughed.

Irene's husband A.C. died around 1980. On top of the grief of becoming a widow, Irene had a visit from a State tax officer who required that she show him the real estate properties in which they had invested their savings. There was a bite in her voice, as she told us that the man viewed their investments as her husband's lone possessions and assured her that A.C. would not have wanted her to have access to all of their property as he determined the State's tax bill. By the time she told the story, the State inheritance law had changed. She would not have been subjected to the same condescension in 1990 that she had endured in 1980. Irene was one of the first women directors in the Oak Ridge federal facilities. She had become a supervisor in a man's world, yet she was a helpless pawn in the hands of the State tax assessor.

The women of Saudi Arabia were in the news last week. This is the last place on earth where women have been denied the right to drive a car. They again organized a protest to their dependency status by taking to the streets behind the wheels of their husband-owned automobiles. One news article speculated that the government will ignore the protest as in the past. There will be neither arrests nor any change in the law.

The plight of powerlessness calls for persistent prayer. Put in perspective with the continuing misogyny especially in primitive cultures of our world, we can begin to understand the situation behind the parable. Jesus told a story to illustrate a principle, "that they should always pray and not give up." The story is about a widow who has been denied justice, probably access to her deceased husband's estate. The most powerless person one could imagine in that world was a woman alone, without husband, father, or brother to intervene in this male dominated culture. At marriage a woman became a property of her husband and his family. At his death, she was at the mercy of her in-laws. If she had been a good wife and born a son, she might have a legal advocate and access to the farm through a rightful heir, her male child; but woe to any widow who was left childless or with only daughters to stand by her. The Jewish, biblical culture seemed to be aware of the helpless status of widows and orphans and counseled social justice in their behalf, but justice was hardly the interest of judges under Roman rule, and some were particularly harsh in ignoring the appeal of any woman, much less a woman without a man.

Jesus offered a hypothetical case to illustrate, of all things, the importance of persistent prayer. The judge in the story was heartless, without fear for God or regard for men. I suspect that women were so far below his radar that they did not register at all. The situation was essentially hopeless. Any woman with this judge would be a case of futility. Wisdom dictated surrender. It was time to give up. Maybe another man would come along, like Boaz for Ruth, to keep the woman from resorting to prostitution for survival. Or maybe it was time, as counseled by Job's wife, to curse God and die.

But this particular widow had a stubborn streak. She pursued the only power she knew, persistent nagging, harassment if you will, for fair treatment. Her strategy was simple: wear down the opposition; eventually you win. This particular judge may have been without heart, but he was not without mind.

He could see the dark at the end of the tunnel. If he did not give in to the woman's pleas, she would eventually wear him down (the Greek idiom here is a slap in the face). So a proverb was born: the nagging widow gets her due. And that is an illustration of the importance of persistent prayer.

This is probably the worst parable in the Gospels, the kind pastors like to ignore. It is only found in Luke, who usually defends the underdogs of society. Is it Luke's creation? Rudolf Bultmann noticed the close similarity to that other story about persistence where a man is the subject in need of help. He turns to a friend, after dark, after bedtime for bread to feed his guest. Again the end of the story is proverbial success. Even though the hour is late and the friendship is not all that strong, the man will get out of bed and accommodate his friend so that he can get back to sleep.

Our problem with both stories is the god figure. Is Jesus saying that God is like a sleepy friend who will give you anything you ask in order to get back to sleep or like a heartless, faithless, crooked judge who will give in to the pleas of a helpless widow in order to get her off his back? In most parables, God is represented by a loving father or a righteous judge, not a crook. Actually the crooked judge and the sleepy friend are anti-types. The message calls for perception of the contrast. If a sleepy friend or a crooked judge will eventually respond to persistent pleas for food to eat or justice to be served, what can we expect from a righteous, loving, gracious God?

Prayer is about more than bread or justice, certainly more than bending the will of God. I have been struggling with this issue for decades. It seems that most of the biblical lessons on prayer are about asking from God so that we may receive from God. Prayer has been portrayed, in legal terms, *quid pro quo*, this for that, payment for services rendered. Some of us still wince at the public statement of Baily Smith when he was President of the SBC, that God does not hear the prayers of a Jew. Poor Jesus!

I was named "student chaplain" of my high school in my senior year. These were the days of prayer in the schools, which in our town meant Baptist, evangelical prayers. On the PA system every school day I read from the King James Bible, usually a passage from the New Testament, and either led a prayer or called the classes to recite the Lord's Prayer. Even then I seemed to be aware that we were not all on the same faith page. One morning I ended my prayer "in the name of God" and was admonished by my speech teacher. Mr. Bankhead assured me that God only heard prayer in the name of Jesus. He could cite chapter and verse in John that whatever we ask in the name of Jesus will be granted, but that has not been my experience. Somehow, I don't think that Jesus was talking about a magic formula for getting what we want out of God or for bending God's will to our purposes.

The Keck family next door were Pentecostal Christians. I still have fond memories of Mr. Keck. I bought my first car, a '48 Plymouth, from him. He had a fine woodworking shop and let me use his tools to build cabinets for my sound system. One day he told me about a family in his church with two elementary school boys. The younger kid felt that he was in desperate need for a new bicycle and took up the matter daily at the dinner table. Either a Sunday school teacher or their pastor got a message across to him based on "ask and ye shall receive," and he turned his energy to daily prayers for the coveted bike, much to the parent's relief. The father shared the story with his friends at church with a tattle from the older brother. As Mom was preparing dinner, Jim informed his mother, "Johnny is up there in his bedroom pestering God for a bicycle again."

I have never forgotten the story mainly because it was so revealing of my own simplistic view of prayer as a *quid pro quo* transaction with God. In Oak Ridge, for the first time in my life I have found numerous friendships with secular people, many of whom are agnostic about God and others who are committed atheists. I have been most surprised at hearing the child's view of prayer from my secular friends. It goes something like this: "I tried prayer and never got anything I asked; it doesn't work." Or, "studies have shown that people who pray for healing die anyway; it doesn't work." Then I find the other side of the same coin in books on my shelf where doctors like Herbert Benson and Larry Dossey cite statistical improvement in health because people pray. Is the effect of prayer limited to using the magic words, the right formula, or being a member of the right church?

Perhaps all of God's children need to grow in their understanding of prayer. Glenn Hinson was a favorite teacher in graduate school. From deep roots in New Testament interpretation and church history, he became a widely respected scholar of Christian spirituality. Glenn reads the parable of

Jesus, not in terms of getting something from God, but as an illustration of the alternative to despair. In the early Christian world of suffering and slaughter for their faith as they waited for the final justice of God in the Great Judgment, they were learning the value of persistence in prayer: "The faithful kept crying out, 'How long, O Lord, how long?' Yet they not only did not get the answer they wanted. They probably didn't get any answer at all. Luke's solution: Keep praying. Don't give up. That, almost certainly, is the purpose of the intriguing explanatory addendum. 'But [the question is], when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' For the followers of Jesus the key issue is whether they will remain faithful, persecuted or not, until the eschatological end, when judgment will take place" (E. Glenn Hinson, *Review and Expositor*, 104, fall 2007, p. 723).

So what if you pray without ceasing with neither a bicycle nor a rescue in sight? Does not prayer contain the seeds of hope regardless of the immediate consequences?