

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 10/16/2022, Luke 18:1-8 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

On Thursday morning as I was starting at a blank screen trying to write a sermon about the parable persistent widow, someone rang the church doorbell. It was a salesman trying to get us to change copier companies. We're happy with the company that rents us our copy machine, so Connie has been polite but firm with this guy. The fact that she doesn't just hang up on him, which is what I would do, means that he keeps pushing, and Thursday he just showed up.

Vee answered the door and somehow convinced him to go away. Since I was stalling writing, I watched their interaction on what Connie and I call Church TV: the security cameras that are all over the place and that we can watch from our offices. I thought about him as I reflected on the persistent widow. Jesus seems to encourage her persistence, but I was so irritated by this man and the time he was trying to take up of a valued staff member that if he offered us free use of a copier for a year I wouldn't take him up on. So how, then, can persistence always be a good thing?

Sometimes we can get caught up in Jesus' parables focusing on the story out of context. The context for this parable is Jesus telling his disciples always to pray and not to lose heart.

What does it really mean to pray? This parable will make us think of petition, which is one kind of prayer. The widow asked and asked for something and then she got it because she annoyed the unjust judge with her persistence. So, should we just ask and ask for things in prayer and hope we will wear God down?

The parable makes it sound that way, doesn't it?

But the parable also invites us to think about prayer differently. The widow is not in her home with the curtains closed praying to God for justice. Instead, she is demanding justice from an unjust judge by continually coming to him in person. Rosa Parks reported that this parable gave her strength when she attempted to register to vote in Alabama in the 1940s three times before finally receiving her certificate. That's prayer in action.

When you pray do you stay in a room—maybe this room on Sunday mornings? Or do you take action to try to turn your prayers into reality?

I've preached to you all about prayer often in the past eleven and a half years, and every time it's a little different, because my own prayer life evolves, even as some things stay the same. Such as the sacraments. Eating a bit of bread and drinking a sip of wine is a primary way I pray, as is reading the Bible. But that Bible reading is a lot more meaningful to me the past four years since we've been having regular midday Bible study after Eucharist. I look forward to those 90 minutes on Wednesday all week long.

Or here's another small but significant change: two years ago, when I first came back from disability, I started cracking the window behind me. I still do, but not only for ventilation: also because sometimes I then get to hear rain as I sit there. Sometimes birds. And yes, cars and sirens and heat and cold, but that keeps me mindful of this neighborhood in which we minister. Cracking the window allows a little of the outside in while praying in this place.

As Episcopalians, we are encouraged to pray the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer every day. Sometimes I've prayed Morning Prayer, sometimes Compline, and usually, honestly, neither, because even though reading books is my favorite thing in the world, opening the prayer book routinely—some would say persistently—to the same place sometimes gets stale. But the past year I've been praying Morning Prayer on an app from Forward movement while I walk my dog. I thought of this because I realized that when I read the Sunday lessons in my office, I absorb them differently than I do when I am listening to one of you read them aloud. Sometimes I've been sitting up here on a Sunday morning and I hear a lector reading something and I think, why didn't I put something about *that* into the sermon?

When I hear through my ear buds someone else praying the Venite or reading from the book of Jonah or praying the Lord's prayer, my eyes, instead of reading the words, look at the changing leaves or the starry sky or deer or any number of things that stir my soul as the words stir my soul. But I bet that in five years something else will be my new favorite way to pray.

Praying our labyrinth the past five years has driven home how much I need movement as well as experiencing the outdoors in my prayers, as much as I also need the outdoors. And yet, there is something powerful in kneeling at the communion rail, too, isn't there?

Jesus said, you ought always to pray and not lose heart. How do you keep praying? I regret that there isn't one right way to pray all the time. I think about that saying "He who sings prays twice," and I know that is true for many of you, and I'm sure it was true for the person who wrote it. But it isn't true for everyone. Some people swear by centering prayer: being silent, listening for God. I detest centering prayer when I'm alone, but when I'm in a group, it's one of my favorite ways to pray. I also know that it can be horrible, even painful, for extroverts.

One of the best parts about monthly vestry meetings is that members take turn leading worship. Last Tuesday Liz led us in breath prayers, a kind of prayer that has long intrigued me but that took on deeper meaning after my lung cancer surgery. Such prayers were the only kind of prayer that worked for me the week I was in the hospital, so last January, when my friend Samantha, who is also a priest, called me from the ICU to ask how I had prayed when I'd been in the ICU I suggested such prayer to her. It didn't help her. So the two of us are writing some prayers together in the hope that we will have answers for other people struggling to pray when sick.

No one has prayer completely figured out—well, no one besides Jesus, and by offering parables like this one to us, we can safely assume that prayer wasn't meant to be clear and easy. We discussed prayer at some length in Bible study this week, about how it is communicating with God. God wants to know what's on our hearts, and we can bring anything to God in prayer, including our anger or our feeling of distance. But, Jesus says, we ought always to pray and not lose heart.

I've always liked the blessing that I am using in October and November, from Phillips Brooks. I came across it eight or nine years ago at a continuing education event, and it took on new meaning from me two years ago when I came back from four months away on disability, with its language about not praying for easy lives but to be stronger, and not praying for tasks equal to our powers but for power equal to our tasks, because then the doing of our work would be no

miracle but we would be the miracle, and every day we will wonder at ourselves and the richness of our lives which was given to us by the grace of God.

I had not internalized until then how much of a miracle my life is, every day. "Praying always," to me, is taking the time each day to wonder at myself and the richness of my life, and I don't have a simple formula to teach you how to do it.

Being in this room with all of you is the place where I pray best. Sometimes I'm heartbroken in this room, sometimes angry, often frustrated. But this is also the place where I see miracles.

Every one of you is a miracle. How will you pray today?