
Homily for Proper 24

A homily by Canon Todd Smelser
Proper 24 – Year C

Churches, as well as synagogues and mosques, are built to be houses of prayer. One of the joys of this Cathedral is that we are open every day, from early in the morning until sometimes late into the evening. Throughout the day, members and visitors come here—sometimes for a meeting, or a bible study, for lunch, to attend a noontime Eucharist or to meet with one of the staff. But sometimes I will see someone just come here to say their prayers—in one of the chapels or in the Nave of the Cathedral. No need to make an appointment for that—since we believe that access to our loving God is always available. We clergy know too well the importance of prayer and its centrality in our Christian lives. Yet we also know the experience of powerlessness when you stand by the side of critically ill patient in the hospital, with family members praying for a healing miracle. We know well the sense of inadequacy when we do pastoral care with a couple, knowing full well that the chances of their reconciliation seem faint. We hear the frustrations of people dealing with all kinds of problems and issues. Clergy know often firsthand, the feeling that you've done all the right things, tried to live a good life, and bad things still happen. We also know that the question "Does prayer really work?" is heavy laden with emotion and that its answer must be anything but simple.

Many of us want to believe that God will intercede at our urging and do what we want God to do. Annie Dillard calls it "God sticking a finger in, if only now and then." God is regularly given credit for finding a new job or finding a good parking space. Super Bowl champions regularly thank the God who secured their victory and the Book Store sells lots of statues of St. Joseph, who ends upside down in the yard of a family wanting to sell their home.

Jesus told a parable once about persistent prayer, and even tells us the purpose of the parable: of the disciples' need "to pray always and not to lose heart." It's a delightful little story of two unforgettable characters: a harsh judge utterly without conscience who "neither feared God nor had respect for people" and a widow who is poor, helpless, defenseless, and in need of justice. Once can imagine the scene—the judge seated on the dais, throngs of petitioners gathered around, some represented by lawyers, others just shouting out their requests from the crowd. The woman is in that crowd every day when the court convenes. She wants vindication against an unnamed adversary. Every day she asks for justice. Every day the judge ignores her. She nags and badgers and keeps coming back. Finally, realizing she is not going away, the judge relents and renders a favorable judgment. And Jesus asks, "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?"

If we interpret this parable in one way, with God as the judge, then one wonders if the purpose of prayer is merely to "wear God out" until we get what we pray for. But we believe that God is a loving and merciful God. Yet too often God does delay. Too often our most fervent prayers—for healing, for justice, for inner peace—go unanswered. Too often, our experiences with prayer lead us to perceive God as an unjust judge, turned away from the urgency of our requests for reasons we can't begin to fathom.

But perhaps this parable isn't about God at all. I wonder if it's about us, about the state of our hearts and the motivations behind our prayers. Maybe what's at stake is not who God is and how God operates in the world but who we are, and how we might fortify our spiritual lives through prayer.

Jesus bids us not to "lose heart" in the beginning of the parable, and ends with this zinger "And yet when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" So perhaps the parable offers us two things: how not to lose heart, and what faith

might look like.

When I lose heart I succumb to weariness, numbness and even despair. I lose my focus and direction and energy. My spiritual GPS is out of whack. In contrast, the widow in Jesus' parable is the very picture of purposefulness and precision. She knows her need, its urgency, and knows exactly where to go and whom to ask in order to get her need met. Persistent prayer—with a full heart over a long period of time—does really change us. Our heart grows stronger—becomes more in tune with God's true intentions. And sometimes—good things happen even when we don't receive the answer we thought we were praying for.

Like so many things in the spiritual world, prayer is finally a great mystery. We can't know why some prayers are answered quickly and others are not. We can't understand why our well-intentioned please often hit the wall of God's silence—sometimes for a very long time. Yet, from the heart of this bewildering mystery, Jesus asks, "Will I find faith on the earth?"

In today's parable, faith is about persistence. The widow persists in her belief that good things will come to her, even when the odds don't look good. Praying ultimately means trusting in God, not in ourselves. Scripture doesn't say that we will always get what we pray for. But it does remind us that God's persistent, unshakable, everlasting love is for each of us. Praying is and always has been hard work in the interim—between God's promise and its fulfillment.

We clergy don't really have any corner on the market of reading God's intentions. But we have made a commitment to be there in those moments of doubt and fear, when words seem to fail. And God promises to be there too.