

“Is This How I am Supposed to Pray?”

Rev. Dr. Judy Kincaid, A Sermon for Every Sunday

Luke 18:1-8

The last time I was at Target, I saw a little boy out shopping with his mom. He was walking alongside his mother’s shopping cart clutching a bat. He was small, maybe 8 or 9 years old. He almost had to run to keep up with his mom’s brisk pace. He was trying to get her to let him put the bat in the cart. She said, “No, we are not shopping for you today.” He went on to explain how special the bat was and why he needed it. He was articulate and very specific. Yes, he had a bat for little league, but this was for practicing at home in the yard it would improve his game. Please. Please. She still said no. I saw him again later. The bat was not in the cart yet. But his mom had not made him put it back. She seemed to be softening. Please, I’ll do chores to pay for it. I knew I shouldn’t eves drop but it was impossible not to hear the kid. I didn’t know whether to admire him or be annoyed. He was so **very persistent**. Finally, his mom said, “Call your Dad. See what he thinks.” I could hear the boy reasoning with his father. “It is on sale,” he pleaded. “This is the best possible price.” I did admire the kid. Heck, I wanted to buy him that bat. I had to finish my shopping. I saw them as I was checking out. I really hoped he had the bat. When I peeked in their cart and saw that the bat was in there I wanted to shout for joy. He got it. His begging paid off.

It made me wonder. Is that what prayer is supposed to be like? Today we read the parable of the persistent widow from the gospel of Luke. The poor widow just wants justice. The judge is a bad man. He doesn’t fear God or respect people. He admits it. He actually says, “I don’t fear God or respect people.” He gives her what she wants in the end but **only** because she keeps bothering him and he wants to be done with her.

This is not an easy parable to interpret. Christians have always struggled to make sense of it. Is God the judge? That makes me uncomfortable. I can imagine God as a judge, but a fair judge—a kind judge. The judge in this story is not good. He’s a jerk. This judge can’t represent God because we know that God is good. The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth. (**Exodus 34:6**) Good and upright is the Lord. (**Psalms 25:8**) The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works. (**Psalms 145:9**) And finally from the Gospel of Mark, No one is good but One, that is, God.

So, God’s not the judge but what do we make of this parable of the widow who will not give up and the bad judge who finally gives in and helps her? Luke tells us what to make of it. In the verse that introduces the parable he says, “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” The parable ends by asking if the Son of Man will find faith on earth. So, have faith, don’t give up. If an unjust judge will grant blessings imagine what our good and gracious God will do for us!

Pray and don’t give up is a good message. It is something I have heard all my life. I agree with it and I find comfort in it, but I have to admit, occasionally, I have a problem with it. There are times in my life when I have prayed faithfully and persistently for things I did not get. I bet it is

the same for you. Why is that?

Sometimes it's easy to see, especially in hindsight, why God doesn't give us all the things we pray for. God is not going to give you anything that is bad for you, even if you ask for it, even if you ask for it 100 times a day for 100 days.

Think about all the crazy things that children ask their parents for. A good parent simply does not grant a child's every wish. I know my children have wanted some pretty strange things—things I could not give them even if I tried. My son Eli likes being tall, but he is not as tall as he would like. When he was 10, we were talking one night at dinner and wondering how tall he was going to be when he grew up. I asked him, if you could pick and God would make you as tall as you wanted to be, how tall would that be? He said he would want to be 8 feet tall. My youngest girl is Olivia. When she was three her life's ambition was to be a snake. If you said, what do you want to be when you grow-up, she always said a big, brown, snake.

I think it is a **good** thing God doesn't give us everything we want. It would be very inconvenient to have one child grow up to be 8 feet tall and another grow up to be a snake.

It is not just children who pray for things that are ill advised. I know I have done it. I have to admit, when I was really hurting and really angry, I have prayed for God to smite people. I have said to God, "What would it hurt, just a couple strategically placed lightning bolts? You used to do it in the Old Testament. The world would be better off without this person who is hurting me. God doesn't say yes to those sorts of prayers, at least not for me. I **never** get lightning bolts when I pray, but I often get peace.

What about the prayers for things that are reasonable? What about hungry people who are just praying for something to eat? What about people who are being abused and they want it to stop? We know God is on the side of justice. Why can't those prayers always be answered yes? I don't know the answer.

I suspect part of the reason for the suffering in this world is that God has given us free will. We are not puppets. We are supposed to be taking care of each other and we are not doing as well as we should be.

I do know from reading scripture that God wants only good things for us. God is not sending pain and suffering as a test or a punishment for not praying enough or not praying the right way. We don't need to be afraid to talk to God about anything. We should never be embarrassed to lift up what is in our hearts, even if what is there is ugly or selfish or silly. God wants to hear it, whatever it is. A loving parent always wants to know what is going on with her children.

At the beginning of the gospel of Luke, Jesus taught his disciples to pray. He gave them what we now call "The Lord's Prayer." He taught them to trust God and pray "thy will be done." Trusting God to hold you in the midst of life's struggles and praying "Thy will be done," is kind of like learning how to swim. I remember when I was little, I really wanted to swim, but I couldn't figure it out. I tried to master the water. I would struggle and struggle and flail around in a way that was awkward and just didn't work. I always sank. One day, I gave up and stopped trying so hard. I took a deep breath and decided to rest for a while. I was surprised and delighted to find that I was floating!

When I stopped struggling, the water held me up. I think prayer is like that. God the Holy Spirit is always there for us. Surrounding us with love and care—reminding us to relax and have faith, even when the seas of life are stormy.

There was a very important time in my life when I did not get what I prayed for. My mother died when she was only 67 years old. I prayed that she wouldn't. I prayed that if she had to die, I would get to Omaha in time to say goodbye to her. These prayers were answered "no." When I got there, I prayed that I could get the funeral over quickly and come back to Michigan because I longed for the comfort of my own home and my congregation.

That prayer was answered "no" also. There was a tornado that knocked out the power at the funeral home, knocked down trees at the cemetery and caused problems all over the city. I had to wait a week to bury my mother. I am very bad at waiting. I was stuck with my three kids in my parent's tiny apartment. We didn't have anything to do but be sad, angry and frustrated.

My father was there, and he hates waiting too. I got my impatience from him. We ended up talking to each other while we waited together. We had some great conversations. I found out some things about him I didn't know, and I got to hear stories about the adventures my parents had before I was born. There was a swimming pool at the apartment and because I had the time, I took my kids there and taught my daughters how to swim. I told them if they would trust me and listen to me, they could float. The water would hold them up. I realize now that I didn't get what I asked for, but I got the Holy Spirit. I persistently prayed and prayed for things that for whatever reason, I couldn't have, but that doesn't mean that I didn't get an answer. I got time with people who are important to me. I got a sense of calm. I got the realization that my mother was fine and I would see her again someday.

Learning to pray is like learning to swim. If you trust and relax the Holy Spirit will keep you afloat."

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