

## THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

### *God's To-Do List*

A sermon preached on October 21, 2007, by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

**2 Timothy 4:1-5** *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: <sup>2</sup> proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. <sup>5</sup> As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

**Luke 18:1-8** *Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup> He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup> In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' <sup>4</sup> For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup> yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup> And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

There are all sorts of prayers – intercessory prayers, prayers of invocation and benediction, prayers of thanksgiving and prayers of dedication.... Attending an ecumenical gathering of ministers one day, I learned a new kind that could only be called a retaliatory prayer. A couple of my colleagues got into a heated disagreement about something and each was testily claiming that God was on his side. Finally, one combatant played his ace: "I'm going to pray for you!" he pompously announced, whereupon the other snarled, "I'm going to pray for you first!"

There are prayers for help, prayers for patience, and prayers when patience has run out. A woman invited some guests to dinner. When everyone had taken their place at the table, she asked her six-year-old daughter to say grace. "I don't know what to say," the little girl said. "Just say what you hear Mommy say," her mother advised. So the little girl said, "Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner!"

There are bidding prayers, and prayers for healing, and prayers in disguise. A pastor was concluding his long pastoral prayer one Sunday morning when he suddenly realized he had forgotten to make an important announcement at the beginning of the service. So, he hastily inserted, "...and, Gracious God, send your Spirit to this congregation so that they shall know that at the potluck which is scheduled for Wednesday night at 5:30 in the common room, those with last names beginning A through G should bring a meat dish, H through P vegetables, and Q through Z salads and desserts, and that child care is available. In Jesus' name we pray, amen."

The Bible contains many references to prayer, and it recites a few – but only a few, leading us to wonder why, if prayer is so important, that there isn't a whole chapter on it somewhere in the Torah or in one of Paul's letters. There isn't. In fact the Bible is very short on spiritual technology, if you will. It's as though scripture understands prayer like most of us

understand breathing – it is so vital to life and so much a part of our being, we do it without thinking.

At one point, apparently forgetting how to breathe, the disciples say to Jesus, “Teach us to pray.” “Pray, then, in this way,” Jesus says: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’” The Lord’s Prayer is so familiar to us, it truly is like breathing. So much a part of muscle memory, our mouths can recite it while our minds are laying plans for Sunday afternoon’s activities. But given who we are and how much we care about being in charge of our own lives, I wonder if we realize what we’re doing when we say it. For, the Lord’s Prayer is all about giving up our attempts at control, and we’re pleading for God’s will – not ours – to prevail in the world.

How many of our fervent prayers are, in essence, contrary to the Lord’s Prayer’s petitions that God’s will should be done instead of our demands? How many prayerful petitions, how many anxious pleas spring from our eagerness to shape outcomes and our sense that God would do something differently if only God were better informed.

The Lectionary – that calendar of scripture readings we generally follow in our Sunday morning worship services – has focused us on the Gospel of Luke since the middle of June. With today’s scripture lesson we reach a climax of sorts toward which Luke has been drawing us for sixteen weeks. It is the rhetorical question Jesus asks after telling the parable about the widow and the arrogant, unjust judge: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

This question, though appearing on Jesus’ lips, has had a contemporary ring to it in every generation. Surely it was being asked in Luke’s time, several generations after Jesus’ death. As a mental picture, I perceive Luke as a pastor standing before his congregation on a Sunday morning, the outline of a sermon on prayer and faith before him. As he scans the faces of those seated before him he sees mixed looks of worry and anxiety, of boredom and of preoccupation with the ordinary, routine concerns of life. He knows some stories behind each look, and he wonders if it’s possible or even fair to expect them to trust in someone they had never seen, someone who had been put to death by the authorities fifty years earlier, someone whose teachings if they were obeyed would surely bring upon them the scorn of their neighbors and possibly the condemnation and persecution of the state.

I used to look at the disciples and other people of the Bible as paragons of faith. I built them up in my mind to be almost superhuman, and in the process made myself look completely inadequate. I’ve come to realize what a person of faith must look like is a person like you, and a person like me. The people of Luke’s church were people like us, confident and capable in some ways, perplexed and uncertain in others. How, persons of every time have asked, can we live by integrity of faith when virtually every temptation within us wants God to warp reality to suit our needs?

In scripture Jesus never deals with faith as a crisis to be avoided or a problem to be solved. Faith is not a matter that he theologically wrestles to the ground. Indeed, the quality of faith he spoke of is of such a nature that no precise test exists to show whether it’s there or not, and no logical equation or hypothesis can narrowly define it. Faith shapes itself in the terms of each life expressing it, so the book on faith looks more like poetry than a set of operating instructions.

Or, the book on faith is a collection of parables, which opens up possibilities rather than closing possibilities down. Jesus said faith is sometimes like carrying a cross, but it can also be understood as being a seed. He said to have faith is to have authority over evil, but it is also to sometimes suffer from evil’s ravages. Being faithful is being generous and it is taking risks for the sake of others, but it is also gratefully receiving. Faith is passive adoration, but it is also active serving. Faith is fire, but it is also streams of living water.

And, in today's story, faith is persistence. The widow and the judge of Jesus' parable are two more of the countless anonymous, ordinary people who populate his stories. But they are real people with real problems. Especially the widow has problems, because in her society, without a husband, a father, or a son, she is utterly powerless. Women were not allowed to inherit. They had no standing in a court, so the judge was in no way obliged to hear her plea. Her only strength was her persistence, her only weapon that of being a pest. If this amoral judge, this magistrate without scruples, who cared nothing for the woman or for the law of God, could respond to the woman's pleas, can you not imagine, Jesus asks, that God who is good will respond to the cries of his children for justice? It is an argument from the lesser to the greater, a device Jesus uses often in his teaching. If such-and-such is true in the small ways we deal with one another on earth, how much more it will be true in the way God will hear our prayers, he is saying.

But there's the rub. We tend to make all such issues very personal. So, for us the question is not, "Did the judge grant the woman's request?" but, "Will God grant ours?" What is this parable suggesting inclines God favorably toward us? Is getting God to grant our requests simply a matter of unceasing prayer? If we make big enough pests of ourselves, will God listen?

Our native self-centeredness tempts us to make our personal needs and wants God's agenda. But think for a moment: if prayer is just a technology to manipulate God, how does that save us? Does it not, indeed, simply intensify our selfishness?

Anne Lamott writes that there are essentially only two kinds of prayer. One kind says, "Help!" The other kind says, "Thanks!" There is, indeed, another kind of prayer that transcends "help!" or "thanks!" Benedictine father Basil Pennington writes that "Prayer is not talking to God...it is *lectio divina*, listening to the divine speak to us..." Pennington's advice takes us back to the Lord's Prayer, whose sense is something like this: we are aware, our God, of our very basic needs – for daily bread, for repair of relationship damaged by sin, and for protection – but only you, God, know how otherwise the world should run, for which we trust you absolutely.

For the pestering widow as well as for us, the issue of faithful praying has more to do with listening than telling. The goal is not to guide God, but to allow God to guide us. The idea is not to bring God to our side, but seek ways we can be on God's side. Living faithfully is not so much doing the will of God as it is willing the will of God.

John Boykin writes, "Our relationship with God is not about getting God to decide for us. Our relationship with God is not about events and external happenings. It is about our hearts, about becoming 'new creations in Christ...'" Where we refuse to change is where all our troubles start. We like ourselves the way we are. We think our perceptions of the world should be everyone's perceptions, including God's. Let us stay the same, we say, and let God change everything.

It is not my place to tell you what you can and cannot bring before God in prayer. I would raise the question of motive, however. If in praying we are seeking the presence of God, if we are attuning our minds to listen, if we are attempting to claim the promise of God's love and hope, then it is prayer at its most powerful. If we pray to make two-plus-two not be four, if we pray to put a new spin on our circumstances, if we are about attempting to manipulate, cajole, or subvert God's power to our own will, then it is prayer at its weakest.

Prayer creates a new situation. If you would seek newness of life, be in that mode of listening the Apostle Paul speaks of when he advises the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing." George Buttrick preached that, "Prayer's greatest healing is therefore not healing, but the courageous and creative acceptance of the terms of mortal life. True prayer does not evade pain, but gains from it insight, patience, courage, and sympathy; and, at long last, makes

it an oblation to God. True prayer does not sidestep death, but greets it. This is healing beyond healing.”

Does all this leave us with a vague sense that things are getting out of control? Well, that’s what faith is all about, giving up the fiction of our being in control and trusting the God who is. The destitute widow pestered the judge not because she was sure that by doing so the judge would grant her request. In fact, given her situation she had every reason to believe devoting her energies to getting the judge's attention was a waste. She kept on, however, because there was the hope something might happen. She kept on because the alternative was to do nothing, and giving up would be tantamount to not taking God or her life seriously.

That is part of what faith is about: taking life seriously. Not so seriously that our life becomes more important than another’s, but neither so casually that we lose touch with that sense of preciousness and infinite value which God has given each of us. What makes our lives precious is not a certain outcome in each event, nor our ability to conform events to our preferences. What makes life good is not our ability to control everything that happens to us, or to control others so that they might make us happy. Had we all this power, surely we would be the most miserable of creatures, needless of friend, family, community, or God, isolated, above the fray, encapsulated in an extreme aloofness.

Instead, we are thrust into the next moment, each new day an unknown country, where – blind to possibilities – we awaken to the hope that grace and goodness are ours because God stands near. The good news is not that faith guarantees personal victories, but that faith grasps that we are never alone and, ultimately, God’s victory is assured.

Like the widow banging on the door of the judge's house, our vocation is to act upon the conviction of things unseen, yet hoped for. There is no way to prove the promises of God except to act upon them, and acting upon them find they are true, every one of them. We cannot control, but we can enjoy the surprise of life. We cannot manipulate God, but we can enjoy God's blessings. We cannot see the future, but we can trust that there is no future without God accompanying us into it. At every moment we are uncertain of outcomes, but at every moment uncertainty challenges us to act faithfully.

We cannot live without faith, and faith is all about living with uncertainty. It is in faith that we see the difference between light and dark, beauty and ugliness, faith and despair – each unfolding moment demonstrates to us that what is good and true must be discovered in God’s gracious promises, not contrived in our selfish wills. How could we live without faith which leaves old comfortable certainties behind and reaches out for the next moment's surprise? It is faith which secures the future and faith which reveals the truth. It is faith which gives us a path to take when there is no path visible, and faith which takes the uncertainty of the day and makes it the stuff of God's purpose for tomorrow.