



Pray Without Ceasing: A Tale of Three Widows

TEXT
Luke 11:5–13; 18:1–8

February 26, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

Today concludes the sermon series “I Know That’s What It Says, But That’s Not What It Means.” Together, we have examined texts that seem to frown upon women standing in pulpits and partners seeking divorce. In other weeks we admitted that we will always struggle against God’s vision for us; we rejoiced in remembering that even still, we will never, ever, fall outside the love of God, in this life or the next; we learned that being perfect has nothing to do with being a perfectionist; and we discovered that God is big enough to absorb the fullness of our being — even our anger and our hate. Over and over we have been reminded that reading the Bible literally means, more often than not, that we miss what it’s actually saying.

That’s a lesson my fourth grade class struggled to learn. I’ve told you before that I grew up attending Catholic schools. I suppose you could argue that becoming Presbyterian makes you a not-exactly-super-devout Catholic, but the truth is, it was through those early years of my life that I learned there is no separating out “faith” from “the rest of life.” They are always

and inextricably woven together. There are different ways to learn this; I learned it by means of spelling tests that included the word “transubstantiation” and a very uneven history project titled “Popes Through the Ages.” It would take me awhile to learn that this was in many ways actually a gift, even if it did sometimes arrive in questionable form. From a young age, there was no corner of my life that faith didn’t worm its way into.

It was in the fourth grade that we learned how to handle the day before Ash Wednesday. For us, the day before Ash Wednesday was the Day of Deciding. It was the Day of Deciding what we were going to give up for the entirety of Lent. It’s a fairly common Catholic practice to abstain from something for the duration of the season. And then, because this was my quirky little school, for art class we would draw pictures of that chosen item and post it on the class bulletin board, apparently so our piety could stare us down for 40 days. Most of us started out thinking, bravely, “I’ll give up chocolate.” Or “I’ll give up watching TV.” One of us tried to give up homework. That didn’t fly. But as the morning

wore on, we realized something important. Giving up ice cream? Not gonna happen. But giving up strawberry ice cream? If one were to do that, all other forms and flavors of ice cream would be, per the letter of the law, permissible. Our bulletin board that year was absurdly specific, filled with strawberry ice cream, barbecue potato chips, Saturday morning television, and the like. Our teacher congratulated us on our “attention to detail.”

We kept paying attention. A few weeks later, at an all-school assembly, the priest read the same scripture passage I just read, about praying without ceasing. “Jesus wants this of you,” he told us. As we trooped back to our classroom, more than a few of us had the same thought. We sat back at our desks and our teacher, Mrs. Morgan, handed out a math quiz. Our heads remained bowed. “Class,” she said, “you may begin.” Our spokesperson raised her voice without raising her eyes. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” she said, “but Jesus instructs us to pray without ceasing. We can’t take the quiz. We’re praying.” Mrs. Morgan didn’t miss a beat. “Oh,” she said. “You can take the quiz. Because I suspect that once you start working on

it, your prayers will actually increase.” Turns out she was right.

I love to tell that story, reminiscing about some of the funnier moments of my school days. The lessons we teased apart back then — they weren’t all bad for a room full of eight-year-olds. But I am grateful for all of the people along the way that helped me learn a more nuanced approach to understanding scripture. I can’t help but channel a little of the apostle Paul here: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” And it is a good thing. Friends, we cannot abide with a childish approach to scripture because we are not living in childish days.

We cannot afford to be childish when microbes still outsmart medical doctors. We cannot afford to be childish when freedom of the press is intentionally dismissed. We cannot afford to be childish when Alzheimer’s still has the power to destroy memories. We cannot afford to be childish when people from Flint, Michigan, all the way to Nairobi, Kenya, do not have clean water to drink. We cannot afford to be childish when bullies prevail on the playground. We cannot afford to be childish when protecting our security matters more than welcoming the stranger. And we cannot afford to be childish when three men are shot in our own backyard.

I trust you heard about this. It happened on Wednesday night. Srinivas Kuchibhotla and

Alok Madasani were shot while getting a drink after work. Ian Grillot was shot when he rushed in to help. All three were taken to the hospital. Kuchibhotla died later that evening.

Witnesses reported that before he opened fire, the shooter yelled, “Get out of my country!” This hasn’t been confirmed as fact by the police yet. Maybe he yelled it; maybe he didn’t. Whether or not it was yelled Wednesday night in Olathe, it has been yelled before, and our current climate suggests it will be yelled again.

Kuchibhotla’s wife — Sunayana Dumala — when she was interviewed, she said she had asked her husband recently if they should move to another country where they might be safer. He assured her they would be okay. In the midst of her grief, Dumala made a demand of the government: She wants a response to this crime and others like it. “I need an answer,” she said. “I need an answer for everyone out there. Not just for my husband, but for everyone, all those people of any race.” “I need an answer,” she said. Does that sound familiar? In that city there was a widow who kept coming and saying, “Grant me justice ...” We are not living in childish days. Fortunately, the Gospel of Luke was not written to a childish audience.

Here’s some of what we know about it. While some of the other gospels were written to Jewish communities, Luke seems to be written primarily to Gentiles ... non-Jews. It is a gospel that wants its readers to

understand that God offers life and love, hope and salvation, to Jews and Gentiles alike. It is a gospel written to include those who are thinking they might be left out — and as far as Luke is concerned, that includes not just the Gentiles, but everyone else at the fringes, too: women and children, the poor and the broken and the stranger. It starts all the way back in the first chapter, with the Magnificat. Mary prays to God before Jesus is even born. She prays, celebrating that the hungry will be filled, the poor will not go wanting, the weak will be made strong. That theme continues throughout the rest of the gospel, and it is throughout the rest of the gospel that Jesus follows his mama’s lead: He prays to God. In fact, by Luke’s account, Jesus spends more time praying than he does anything else. He who is justice incarnate? His most predominant action is prayer.

This is instructive to me. And helpful. Because I have to confess to you, that even while a significant portion of my job is to be with you and pray with you, there are moments when not being able to do more than that makes me feel incredibly powerless. Not something more like grab a scalpel and scrub in on the surgery; I just often find myself wishing that my prayers could yield predictable (and positive) results. I know that’s not a logical, or even particularly faithful response; it’s just honest.

That’s why I need this parable, and the one that Diann/Patti/Charles/Ian read earlier.

There are some unhelpful ways to read them, interpretations that would suggest if you don't get what you want, if every door doesn't open for you, you aren't faithful enough. I suppose some might think that's what it says, but that's not what it means. Because here's the thing — the widow in this story is lauded for her persistence. But persistence comes only when it's needed; when despite your best efforts it isn't working out yet. And you only need encouragement to keep going, when someone else understands that you might be ready to give up. I think that widow was met with an awful lot of silence for an awful long time. This champion pray-er said a whole lot of prayers that got a whole lot of nothing in response. So hear this word: If you are praying with all your might, and it feels like little more than talking into the wind? You're not doing it wrong. I promise.

We aren't told specifics of the widow's words because her words are not the important part of her prayer. Her persistence was the important part. She insisted on justice, which means, she insisted that what was wrong be made right. And that what was broken be made whole again. That kind of prayer? That kind of determined, honest, faithful prayer? It can change anything. It can even change us.

Six weeks ago, my friend Scott was diagnosed with angiosarcoma. It's a cancer that is as aggressive as it is rare, and it was a situation that seemed as unfair as they come. Scott was a Presbyterian pastor, the

same age as me. He was married to Lara, his wife, who he first asked out when they were 15 years old. Four small children completed their family. If you want evidence that sometimes our prayers receive only silence in response, this is it. Despite the prayers of many, including hundreds of other Presbyterian pastors, which is to say, a whole bunch of professional pray-ers, his condition worsened, rapidly and painfully.

During one of my less eloquent moments of prayer for my friend, I informed God, "Sometimes you make really bad choices," even though not one fiber of my being believes God chose for Scott or anyone else for that matter to get sick and suffer. Lara admitted her prayers started in that same place. But over time, she said, as she continued to pray for her beloved, her prayers began to shift. "We need a miracle" became "We need pain management." "Please, no intubation" became "Please, make it possible for just a few last words." "Give us as much time as possible" became "Grant him a quick conclusion." "Let us keep him here with us" became "Let him go home to you." And on February 13, the medications and the machines took hold of him. Already confused and intermittently unconscious, he still knew what mattered most. In their last exchange, Lara asked him, "Who do you belong to?" And despite everything happening in his body and in his mind, Scott replied, "I belong to God." Finding herself in that moment

was not the answer Lara had wanted; but it was the answer she needed. Knowing that Scott knew he was going to be okay.

Prayer has a way of changing us. Prayer can change our hearts and our hopes, because interacting with God in these most vulnerable moments? Whether you are saying "Thank you" or "I hate you," prayer is the way we interact with God. It is the way we look right into the very face of God. And since way back in the days of Exodus, no one sees the face of God and remains unchanged.

Do you know what happens when we see the face of God? I think what happens is that we see that we are made in God's image. We see something of our own reflection, which calls forth our best self — because if we see our own reflection in God's face ... we cannot help but recognize the reflection of others, too.

In that way, when we pray even our most individual, personal prayers ... we are pushed, inevitably and irrevocably, toward one another. To see ourselves in God's image is to see everyone else that way, too. Of course it is. "Our Father," we pray, and those words alone bind us to one another, siblings every one of us.

So maybe what we need to remember is that rather than prayer yielding a desired answer, prayer yields a divine connection. It is the way we connect to God. I have no earthly idea what the mechanics of it look like, but maybe that is as it should be, for prayer is the

very stuff of heaven, bright, shining, threads that hold us together, connect us to God, and bind us to one another. I can't remember who it was, but someone said a prayer is simply the words uttered by someone who has realized that life can be overwhelmingly hard, and that if we have any chance of getting through it, we are going to need to help each other out.

Because you know what? This story — it wasn't about one persistent widow. It was about three. We don't hear her name in the scripture reading, but last week her name was Lara, and this week her name was Sunayana Dumala. And I don't know what her name will be tomorrow or next week or the week after that, but she or he will show up. I do know that.

So let us pray, without ceasing, that our best selves show up, too.

Because bullying the kid who is different, refusing to share what you have, putting a "keep out" sign on door of the clubhouse, laughing when someone falls down, and refusing to help someone who is hurt — these are the immature actions of children who have not yet learned differently. And we cannot afford to be childish for we are not living in childish days.

The author T.S. Eliot wrote, we are only undefeated because we go on trying. And the entirety of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, bears witness to the same, through the grace of God and the love of Jesus Christ.

So friends, keep trying. Keep knocking on the door, until your hand is sore and your knuckles bleed. Keep demanding that what is broken be made whole, and what is wrong be made right. Pray without ceasing. Pray without ceasing, because "connection with God is our first concern, our worthiest art, our best resource, and our [deepest] joy." It is our first defense and our last resort. Pray without ceasing, because maybe, just maybe, "prayer will brood over our modern disorder as the Spirit once brooded over the void," and maybe, just maybe, "it will summon forth a new world."¹

May it be so.
Amen.

¹From *Prayer*, by George Buttrick, Abingdon Press, 1977.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.