

THE PROBLEM OF PRAYER

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

Every Sunday morning when I was a kid, if I managed to get my clip-on tie and shiny shoes on in time, I got to sit down and watch a show that began with the timeless words:

*Faster than a speeding bullet.
More powerful than a locomotive.
Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.*

*Look! Up in the sky!
It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Superman!*

Yes, it's Superman - strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of

mortal men. Superman - who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel with his bare hands, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights the never ending battle for Truth, Justice and the American Way.

Although the original black and white series began in the 1950's, the reruns continued into my childhood. I loved it when the Man of Steel let bullets bounce off his mighty S-covered chest or bent the barrel of a gun with his bare hands.

Superman was introduced to a new generation in the 1970's with the Superman movies starring Christopher Reeve and Margot Kidder. The 1990's found Superman on television again in the series, "Lois and Clark." In recent times teenage Superman has become popular in the TV hit, "Smallville." But of all the people who've played the Man of Steel over the years, only one person played the role best on screen and off—Christopher Reeve. His off screen heroics occurred only after his 1995 equestrian accident, which rendered him a quadriplegic. Reeve refused to be held back by his physical limitations and led a public crusade for spinal cord research, served as master of ceremonies for the Paralympics, spoke at the Oscars, appeared on Capitol Hill, granted countless interviews, and even continued to act until dying last week from complications related to a pressure sore. He was only 52.

Reeve is a public example of what thousands of people around the world experience every day—life-altering events, from car wrecks to cancer. No doubt many people prayed for Reeve just as many of us have prayed for loved ones who do not recover. What good is prayer in the face of such results? What difference does prayer make?

On the surface, today's scripture lesson *seems* to suggest that if we just pester God enough we will get what

we want. In the parable of the persistent widow, there was an unjust judge who did not care about God or people. A widow kept complaining to him: “My rights are being violated. I am a victim of injustice. Protect me!” The judge consistently ignored her. But after days and days he said to himself, “I don’t care about God or people. But since this widow won’t leave me alone, I’d better see that she gets justice before she wears me out with all her pestering.” Then Jesus said, “Listen to what the corrupt judge says. So what makes you think God won’t step in and work justice for God’s chosen ones, who continue to cry out for help? Won’t God stick up for them? I assure you, God will grant them justice without delay. And yet, when I return will I find faith on the earth?”

Historically scholars interpret this parable as an exhortation to keep on praying, keep on beseeching God day and night until one’s prayers are answered. The only problem is that this interpretation does not reflect our experience. We’ve all seen the Christopher Reeves of the world injured by accident, afflicted by disease, stepped on by injustice. People pray and pray, yet at times if something changes it might be the opposite of the request. Things sometimes get worse.

We miss the point of the parable if we compare God and the unjust judge, if we interpret the story as encouragement to keep badgering God until we get what we want. The point of the parable is not to compare God and the unjust judge, but to contrast them. If a corrupt judge eventually gives in and does the right thing, by contrast our good, just, and loving God can certainly be trusted to do what is right. The contrast is one of character—the judge is corrupt and unfair, whereas God is good, just, and loving.

When we trust in the goodness of God our prayers reflect faith not fear. When we trust in the goodness of God

we believe that whatever happens, *ultimately* God will take care of us and those we love. Life is unpredictable in the short run, but in the long run God will come through for each and every one of us. Ultimately God's got it all taken care of.

William Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke wrote: *When as a child you suffered some injustice, received some blow from life, what did your mother say? She attempted to comfort you. "There, there," she said. "It's all right." What did she mean when she said that? She didn't mean that your pain was silly, for why would she comfort you if you were not in real pain? She did not mean that everything is going to be all right in that moment. You know enough of life to know that often things don't work out all right. What she meant was that finally, ultimately, in the larger picture, the world is structured in such a way that things will be right. Pain does not last forever. Even the worst set-backs can be integrated into life and you go on. In other words, when she said, "There, there, everything will be all right," she was making a statement of faith about the ultimate character of the world. This parable is a story, not so much about the efficacy of prayer, but about the character of God, the trustworthiness of God.*

www.chapel.duke.edu/chapel/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=94).

The life of Jesus demonstrates this trust. Even in his deepest moments of agony and anguish, Jesus stayed true to God, knowing that God would stay true to him. A short time before the soldiers came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus poured out his broken heart to God saying, I wish that this cup (this impending suffering and death) might pass from me, but it's not about what I want, it's about what you deem best. It's about doing your will, not mine. If the story had ended with Christ's gruesome death on Good Friday we might be tempted to question the goodness of God. How fortunate we are that the story ends

with the Easter miracle, the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

And so we pray, in the face of depression, in the face of Alzheimer's, in the face of AIDS. And we wait. And we hope. We pray in the face of war, in the face of terrorism, in the face of senseless destruction. And we wait. And we hope. We pray in the face of starvation, drug and alcohol addiction, and domestic violence. And we wait. And we hope. And by God's grace we act.

Through it all, though, we know in our incomplete and broken world that evil and tragedy go on and on. Therefore we must look to a time beyond time and to a place beyond this place. All of God's promises, all of our deepest longings for peace, healing, and wholeness will be fulfilled. Some in this life, and the rest in the life to come. Somewhere today in the Great Beyond Christopher Reeve not only walks again, but perhaps he even flies without his cape. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Giving and forgiving God, you have created us in your image. Yet there are times we feel like we don't amount to much, and other times when we think we are better than others. Help us keep things in perspective. When we make excuses not to do your will, when we seek revenge rather than reconciliation, when we fail to follow your way of love, forgive us O God.

Thank you for the moments when you have encouraged us, wiped away our tears, and held us close. Thank you for the times when you have answered our prayers and loved ones have recovered. Give us sustaining strength for those times when our prayers seemingly go unanswered. Grant us the vision to see all your good, loving, and peaceful promises fulfilled in your time or beyond time.

We continue to remember those facing war in Africa, Iraq, or in their very homes.

And now to you, O God, be all blessing and glory and honor.
AMEN.