

Sermon Psalm 121 Luke 18:1-8 October 21, 2007

Prayer - Why it pays to bother.

What is it with Luke and prayer? What is it with Dr. Luke, who undoubtedly was a physician, a man of science in his day - and prayer? Several weeks ago - earlier in the Gospel - Luke reported Jesus' teaching to his disciples on prayer.

What we now call the Lord's prayer.

And here, just a bit later, Luke is reporting Jesus talking about prayer again - the power of persistent prayer. No starry eyed new convert to Christianity. No mindless religious fanatic - thinking his will has got to be God's will ...

But a thoughtful, trained scientist of his time, Luke reports another case of Jesus' teaching on the power of prayer.

In his own life, the practice of prayer had powerful influence on Jesus, an influence his disciples could see. And Jesus answered their pleas to know how to let prayer have more influence in their lives.

And - thanks to the Gospel writers, we've been included in this teaching. We've been given a glimpse of the place of prayer in a Christian believers life. Jesus prayed. Taught his disciples, convinced Dr. Luke, and it all led the Apostle Paul to write - pray without ceasing, and James to say, that the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective.

And here, here we act as if we believe what we've read and heard. Because we pray. Week in and week out. And some of us, not all of us I suspect, but some of us pray every day, even when we don't really need anything at all.

Or - is there anytime when we don't need anything at all - that we can get without appealing in some way to a power greater than our own. Is there ever a time when Paul's advice to pray constantly isn't wise? When we shouldn't be bothered by bothering with prayer?

And on that note, will you please - yes. - pray with me.

Lord of life, God of all goodness and guidance for our living, speak to our needs in this hour - May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, be acceptable in your sight, and your good word to us this day, in Christ. Amen.

Just an ordinary pastoral call this week - but no ordinary experience. Instead, a testimony to the power of prayer, to the reason for bothering to bother with prayer at all.

A member, with troubles more than you and I could count, and few positive prospects in her life for change, shared with me her experience of prayer answered.

No, she didn't suddenly find her many physical problems healed, or her financial issues resolved. But she found, late in a sleepless night, an answer to her prayers that renewed her faith, and gave her hope and peace in a truly painful life experience.

She found that all her prayers, her practicing the presence of God in her life, as if God cared...were answered with, what almost seemed, she said, a spoken yes...

A powerful soul stirring heart renewing sense that God was present. And that all things would work together for good.

she had prayed and prayed and prayed as she'd been taught, and naught good she could see had come from it. Nothing that could be seen, just one new life challenge after another.

And pray, as I pray, for self and others, as I've been taught, I wondered why she bothered - with no results to number. Why bother with prayer.

And she taught me why - taught me new faith - taught me, anew, what in truth I know but sometimes doubt.

Prayer, the practice of prayer, the persistent practice of praying to God, when all our needs and wants and hopes and desires, words of praise and confession and petition are shared....

Then prayer empowers us to live our lives with greater peace and purpose. That's what a member taught me to believe and trust anew. And that's what Jesus taught his disciples ...

See the widow. See her pray. And find their in her faithfulness , why you, too, should bother persistently to pray. Isn't that point powerfully clear in the story Jesus' told. The widow and the judge?

In the first place , the disciples simply wanted to have in their lives what the followers of John the baptizer had, and Jesus obviously had in his life. A godliness, a centeredness, a confidence and trust.

And Jesus offered prayer as the practice to procure this kind of personal peace and power. It's what the member I visited had found.

But here, in this story of the Judge and the widow, Jesus shares another equally powerful reason to bother with praying. Prayer has powerful personal impact - even when persistent prayer does not change the actual facts you're facing - your cancer, your divorce, your downsizing.

You do not remain unchanged. Praying, practicing the presence of God faithfully, changes you, and if you are changed, calmed, strengthened, empowered with faith and hope, then everything changes.

And more - if, by prayer , we are changed, and so everything else is changed, too, then the power of prayer is not only personal, it is also public.

It is a developing understanding of quantum physics that I do not understand at all.

But physicists now believe that simply by my observing you, watching you, I change in some infinitesimal way, you. If I play the game seriously, I see the moon and the moon sees me - I change the moon.

And if that is true - wonder of wonders - Jesus knew it. Prayer changes me. And it changes the world I live in.

The Son of God let us in on a secret in life it would take us 2000 years to stumble upon. Did the widow know all this? Hardly. What she knew was what she needed, and the only person who could give her what she needed.

And so she bothered to pray and to persistently petition the judge.

Maggai Dawn writes - Prayer as Jesus taught it, is not (just) personal therapy, or a crutch for the weak. Prayer is about refusing to believe that the way things are has to be the way they will always be; about imagining how the world could be, and gaining the wisdom and the energy to bring it about.

The widow would not take no for an answer to her legitimate complaint - it bothered her enough for her to bother a hard hearted judge into action.

And Jesus reminds us that God is no hard hearted Judge, but a loving God affirming us in our efforts for justice.

The widow needed prayer to ground herself, to renew her sense of her own worth in God's presence. And she needed prayer, don't we all, to empower her to act, to plead her case.

Widows in Jesus' day had no standing, no rights, no advocates, except, at last, in Jesus, who called his followers to care for the widow, the least, the lost and the last.

In the 1800's slaves had no standing in society. And few advocates. But as this year's movie *Amazing Grace* showed, the personal passion for justice of William Wilberforce, empowered in his life by his faith and his practice of prayer, led Him to, in fact, change the world.

Bothered by the sin of slavery, he bothered to pray and to plead with those who meted out justice. And he persisted over many many years, and prevailed, and the slave trade was abolished. *Amazing grace* - the persistent prayers of a persistent prayer - answered.

But that raises a troubling question. Is prayer then, a strategy for getting what we want, if what we want is good?

No... because we are in no position to know what is ultimately Good or better than good. No world record number of people praying for something will obtain, by the weight of our wanting, that thing.

But - yes, yes - at the same time, prayer can help to make us refuse to accept injustice, and give us the determination to see it change.

Bruce Cockburn put this power of practicing prayer in this colorful way...

Kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight. That is persistent prayer...

Can you see, can you hear, can you accept and believe Luke's words ....

That prayer is practicing the presence of God in our lives - and if God is more present with us, in us, then we are empowered to face whatever our personal problems or needs may be with a new perspective - new patience, new hope.

And if, by prayer, we can see more clearly what is the heart of a public issue of injustice, or prejudice - if prayer can give us a new understanding, then it can help us stand on the side of justice. Prayer can help us, empower us, to move our world just a bit closer to this good.

The widow did... and in every great human rights movement, it has been someone, some ones, who have lit and led the way.

And sometimes, sometimes , it happens for you.

You stop and you pray. You say what you need to say, what you need. And you've found a centering in your life, a peace, a power, God present with you, to help you face whatever it is you have to face. And because of that change in you, so has the world you live in changed...

Yes - Yes - more things are wrought by prayer than this world knows...

It pays to bother to pray....

And - is it a strange or very true ending to the story..

Jesus draws a strange and challenging line under everything he has said about prayer.

God answers prayer - But... but.... Will the son of man find faith on earth when he comes? Will Christ find a people praying - a people practicing the presence of God, so that God's will and God's way will more and more mark the days of our lives?

Prayer - it pays to bother - Amen.

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