

2.28.2021 Second Sunday in Lent (Luke 18:1-8)

Many years ago, an ocean liner set out on a journey from Liverpool to New York. Among the passengers were a little boy and girl, who were playing on the ship's deck when the boy lost his ball overboard. He immediately ran to the captain and said, "Captain, stop the ship, my ball fell into the water!" The captain looked at the boy with a kind smile, but said, "I'm sorry son, I can't stop the ship just to get your ball." The boy walked away grumbling, and told the little girl that it was his opinion that the captain didn't stop the ship because he couldn't. He believed the ship was wound up some way in Liverpool, and it just had to run, day and night, until it finally ran down.

The next day, when the children were once again playing on the deck, the little girl dropped her doll down into the engine room, and she thought it had also fallen overboard. She said to the boy, "I'm going to go ask the captain to stop the ship and get my doll." To which the boy replied, "Don't bother asking, he can't help you." But the little girl decided to take her request to the captain, and when he saw the doll lying on the floor of the engine room, he said, "Wait here just a little while." And while the ship continued steadily on its journey, the captain went down into the engine room, picked up the doll, and brought it back to the girl. She was delighted and the boy was amazed, and began to reconsider his opinion of the captain.

Then, the next day, a person shouted, "Man overboard!" When the captain heard the shout, he immediately pulled a lever that gave the order to stop the engines. At his order, the ship stood still until boats were lowered and a life was saved. With the rescued man safely onboard, the ship resumed its journey and soon reached New York, and when the ship was safely docked, the captain walked into town and bought the little boy a better ball than the one he'd lost.

If your life has been anything like mine, you can probably see yourself in each person who asked for the captain's help. Like the little boy, we've made requests to God and received no for an answer, only to see Him later provide

us with a greater blessing than the one we prayed for; like the little girl, we've asked for God's help and been overcome with joy when our prayer is answered; or like the man who fell overboard, we've cried out to God, to His Son our only Savior, and to use the words of King David, we've declared the truth that God *"reached down from heaven and rescued me; He drew me out of deep waters"* (Psalm 18:16).

Always pray and never give up (Luke 18:1 NLT). This is the lesson found in our New Testament reading this morning, a lesson taught through the eyes of a widow who comes to an unjust and incompetent judge over and over again to plead her case. Now we naturally expect a judge to be impartial, to judge righteously, and as Christians, we would hope that a judge would recognize that judgement ultimately belongs to God (Deuteronomy 1:16-17), but the judge in this story has no fear of God and no compassion for the people under his jurisdiction. This unjust, incompetent judge ignores the needs of this widow, yet she refuses to give up.

Eventually, the judge said to himself, *"Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming"* (Luke 18:4-5), and so in the end the persistent widow received the justice she was seeking. Jesus then explains the point of this parable by saying, *"And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry to Him day and night?"* (Luke 18:7). In other words, always pray and never give up, because if an incompetent, uncaring, ungodly judge answers with justice in the end, how much more will God, our loving and holy Heavenly Father, give what is right to His children?

When we pray, we don't always, immediately get what we think is right, and at times, like the boy who lost his ball, that fact can lead some people to believe that God either can't help us (that He has wound up this world and left it spinning on its own), or even worse, He simply won't help us. Yet, when you've seen God answer prayer, when you know that God our Father will give what is right to His children, the question becomes, Why does He delay? Why do His people cry out, *"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me*

forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1)

The answer the story provides to that question, with God as the Captain of our ship, is that God only delays so that at some point in the future He can provide us with a greater blessing. You've probably experienced that in your own life, and by God's grace this is what we look forward to experiencing at the end of this earthly life, when every prayer request is nothing in comparison to what God has prepared for us in His heavenly kingdom. This is our hope for tomorrow, but what helps us through today as we wait for an answer to prayer?

Think for a moment about what may have helped the persistent widow, the boy, the girl, or the man who fell overboard as they waited for an answer. When you consider the persistent widow, the way she kept coming back to the judge, how she returned over and over again to plead her case, it leads you to believe that the fact she was able to approach him must have been a great help to her. The judge said to himself, "*... this widow keeps bothering me,*" yet he never locked his door or turned her away, and so she continued to have the opportunity to ask, and she asked hoping the day would come that she'd receive the justice she was seeking.

Consider the little boy, the girl, or the man who fell overboard. When you think about what may have helped them as they waited for their requests to be answered, the word that comes to mind is faith. In their time of need they each cried out to someone who they believed had the power to help them. Yes, the boy struggled with doubt when he didn't immediately receive his request (and haven't we all been in that boat!), but he changed his mind soon enough when he saw evidence of what the captain could do; and the girl, as well as the person who fell overboard, never wavered in their faith that the captain could help them.

What helps us through today as we wait for an answer to prayer is that we can pray. In fact, we've been taught by the Son of God how to pray, and He encourages us to always pray and never give up, to "*come boldly to the*

throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). What helps us through today is that we can pray, and what helps us through today is Faith in the One, True God to whom we address our prayers. We ask and seek and knock, we always pray and never give up because we’ve seen the evidence. Evidence from philosophy, science, history, existence itself, fulfilled prophecy, Divine Revelation, and experience. We’ve seen the overwhelming evidence of God’s existence, and we’ve seen the evidence that He is good. We’ve seen the Cross, evidence of His perfect love for us. We’ve seen the empty tomb and our Risen Lord, evidence of what God can do, evidence that He has set us free from sin and death and all that held us captive.

In the end, the question is not *what* helps us through today as we wait for an answer to prayer, it’s *Who* helps us through today as we wait for an answer to prayer. By the grace of God, through prayer, we are drawn into communion with the Creator of Heaven and Earth, One who, as the Creator, stands outside His created limits of space and time, One who sees the journey we’re on from beginning to end in one eternal moment. He is the One who helps us through today by saying no, by saying yes, by stopping the ship to rescue us, by working “*all things together for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose*” (Romans 8:28). In the parable we read today, our Lord and our God encourages us to always pray and never give up, because He knows that prayer is the way to Him, and that, no matter what we ask, He is what we really need.