PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

Luke 18:1-8

October 16, 2022

Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

Johnny, a very bright 5-year-old, told his father he’d like to have a baby brother, and, along with the request, offered to do whatever he could to help. His dad, a very bright 35-year-old, paused for a moment, and then replied: “I’ll tell you what, Johnny, if you pray every day for two months for a baby brother, I guarantee that God will give you one!” Johnny responded eagerly to his dad’s challenge and went to his bedroom early that night to start praying for a baby brother.

He prayed every night for a whole month, but, after that time, he began to feel skeptical about the whole thing. He checked around the neighborhood and found out that what he thought was going to happen had never occurred in the history of the neighborhood. You don’t just pray for two months and then, whammo – a new baby brother. So, Johnny quit praying.

After another month, Johnny’s mother went to the hospital. When she came back home, Johnny’s parents called him into the bedroom. He cautiously walked into the room, not expecting to find anything, and there was a little bundle lying right next to his mother. His dad pulled back the blanket and there was – not one baby brother, but two! His mother had twins!

Johnny’s dad looked down at him and said: “Now, aren’t you glad you prayed!” Johnny hesitated a little, and then looked up at his dad and said: “Yes, but aren’t you glad I quit when I did?”

This little sermon today is about praying – and about not quitting praying. It’s not easy to “pray without ceasing,” as the apostle Paul puts it. But we tend to make it more difficult to do by thinking that praying is something quite unlike the things we do all the time – things like talk to each other, share our needs with others, give and receive information, ask for things, express gratitude, say we’re sorry and ask forgiveness, articulate what’s important to us, speak words of love, listen to others. Prayer is like those things. It’s just that in prayer we’re doing those things with God, and God is the one who listens, and God is the one to whom we listen.

But praying without ceasing is even more than those things. Here is my definition of “praying without ceasing” – praying without ceasing is being mindful of the real presence of God all the time, in every situation, within every action, in every word we speak, every thought we have. And where is the real presence of God? In every present moment of life – no matter what else we might be doing in that present moment. The apostle Paul points to mindfulness like this, in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

So: mindfulness of the real presence of God all the time – which is to say: praying without ceasing – that’s what this sermon is about – and that is the practice I encourage for all who listen to this sermon.

Praying always is the subject of this parable before us today from the gospel according to Luke. Over the past weeks our lectionary has featured various parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke. And some of those parables have been rather enigmatic, to say the least. It is not always easy to understand the point in some of Jesus’ parables

Jesus – a Jew – teaches using parables according to what is known as wisdom teaching – along the lines of ancient and traditional rabbinic teaching in Judaism. And wisdom teaching is often not direct nor easily understandable. It is hardly ever literal. It usually involves such things as exaggeration, hyperbole, metaphor, and the like. To read or hear the teaching of Jesus with wooden literalism is a huge mistake. Understanding the teaching of Jesus requires discernment and interpretation and knowledge and wisdom.

However, it doesn’t take much wisdom to understand today’s parable. That’s because the gospel writer, Luke, tells us what the parable is all about. Right at the beginning, Luke tells us: “Then Jesus told them [the disciples] a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” The parable is about persistence in prayer and keeping at it, hanging in there, no matter what obstacle might be in the way.

The widow in this parable is persistent, to be sure. She comes to this judge in order to get some justice against her opponent. We’re not told the nature of the justice she seeks, but we do know that widows in the first century were particularly susceptible to injustice. That’s why so much of Scripture talks about caring for widows and orphans as a duty for all of God’s people.

The impact of her pleas for justice is made more dramatic by the portrayal of the judge as one who had no respect for people and no respect for God. The judge doesn’t care about justice for this widow. But the widow never gives up. She keeps at it. And, because of her persistence, the uncaring judge caves in. The judge grants her justice in order to get rid of her.

Jesus then explains to the disciples that if a judge like this – a judge not interested in justice at all – relents and gives justice to the persistent widow – how much more will God – a God who is interested in justice for all – give justice to those who cry out to him – those who pray and don’t lose heart. The question Jesus then poses for all disciples – including you and me – is: Do you have the faith to do this? Do you have the faith to pray always and not lose heart?

Well, the message and challenge in this parable about prayer was an important one for these earliest disciples of Jesus – disciples who were especially challenged to keep the faith and likely found praying without ceasing not an easy thing to do. For example, some of you may remember that I taught a Bible class on the book of Revelation several years ago, and you may remember that Revelation focuses upon a particular group of first century Christians undergoing persecution at the hands of the Roman emperor, Domitian. And the theme and message of the book of Revelation is “keep the faith” – a theme and message the book presents using images and symbols that were central to apocalyptic literature, the most popular type of literature from 100 BC to 200 AD. The promise in this piece of apocalyptic literature is that God will win out over evil in the end, and God’s promised peaceable kingdom will someday be a reality, and everyone will know God and be aware of God all the time. So, the author of Revelation tells these early Christians to keep the faith and do not lose heart – which echoes what Jesus is telling us in today’s parable.

Well, although most of us do not experience persecution and hardship like that experienced by the first Christians, we do have our challenges in our contemporary life as followers of Jesus. And keeping the faith in the face of life’s challenges begins with prayer – persistent prayer – prayer without ceasing.

And how do we do this? Well, we pray without ceasing when we maintain a mindful and grateful attitude that recognizes the real presence of God in everything, everywhere, every minute of every day. Of course, this worship service is a prime opportunity to practice praying without ceasing. We pray in our corporate prayer, for example – our prayer of confession, our prayers of the people, our prayers of thanksgiving. We pray in our singing, in our instrumental music, in our reading and hearing Scripture, in our affirmation of faith, in our offerings – these are all prayer because, hopefully, we are mindful of the real presence of God as we do those things. The sermon is even prayer – some of you may be praying while it’s going on!

Outside of worship, we pray without ceasing when we embrace the practice of being aware, no matter what else we might be doing at the time – for example, being aware of the real presence of God as we eat breakfast; being aware as we do the dishes or drink morning coffee; being aware as we go for a walk or drive to work; being aware as we do our work; being aware in our communications with others; being aware of God in each present moment – that’s praying without ceasing.

As for intentional personal praying, there are as many ways to pray as there are people who pray. It really doesn’t matter what you say, or how eloquently you say it. All that matters is that your focus, your awareness, your mindfulness, is upon the presence of God.

The best kind of personal prayer, in my humble opinion, is silent prayer – the kind of prayer in which, in the words of Ben Campbell Johnson, “requests diminish, words fall away, feelings no longer have importance, and our hearts sink into silence before God.” Silent prayer may be the most difficult kind of prayer for many of us action-oriented, individualistic, thinking, “can-do” people. It can be difficult to just stop – stop thinking about and fretting about the past, or worrying about the future, or obsessing about the present – and be still in what is the absolute present, the place where God exists. Yes, it is really hard to turn off our thinking – our “monkey brain,” as I have put it before, that continually jumps from one thing to another. But practicing silent prayer helps.

The most basic way to practice silent pray is just do it! Some of you may know, for example, that over the years I usually included a time of silent prayer in the prayers I offered in worship. During those times of silence, I imagine that all kinds of things went through your minds – including, when is this silence going to end? But the idea is to practice doing it – practice blocking out all thinking and try to experience the real presence of God with and within you.

So, whether you are engaging in intentional prayer, or simply engaging in your everyday life activities, try being aware that God is with you all the time – in everything you do and say and think – and consider the concept that such awareness – such mindfulness – constitutes the practice of praying without ceasing. With mindfulness like that, all of life becomes prayer, and you are aware that you dwell in the kingdom of God - always. “Pray always, and do not lose heart” says Jesus. “Pray without ceasing,” says Paul. This is the practice I encourage for all who listen to this sermon

Let us pray: God of Presence: Help us to be still and know you are God – with us always. And help us to be mindful of your presence and your unending love in our unceasing prayers. In the love of Christ, we pray. AMEN.