

Two millennia ago, there was another persistent woman of record, and Jesus used her for an instructive lesson. Like a dog with a juicy bone, this woman hung on, hounding a judge to take her case: "*Grant me justice against my opponent*" (18:3). This woman had a solid case on legal grounds alone: she pleaded for justice, not special treatment. She was persistent. She sought vindication. Her desperation suggests that everything was at stake and she had nothing left to lose. The judge initially refused her, dismissing her case with extreme prejudice and without any real consideration. Her case seemed paltry to the judge, but it represented a real threat to the widow's existence. His utter lack of compassion is shocking.

This went on "*for a while*" (Luke 18:4), says Jesus, but then the judge had a change of heart: not because he repented of his wickedness or admitted the righteousness of the widow's cause, but because he grew weary of hearing her pleas. The widow "endlessly" harassed the judge and finally, he couldn't stand it anymore: "...*because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice*" (vv. 4-5). He simply wanted to get her out of his hair. She wore him out with her persistent pestering.

But this parable is not about being a pest until you get what you want out of life. This is a parable about being persistent in prayer. Prayer is a practice that connects us to God's power, a power much greater than ours; a power that can fill us and transform us and strengthen us and guide us. Prayer is a practice perfected by persistence, by the disciplined determination to be in an ongoing conversation with God.

Scripture is full of exhortations to pray, often paired with the promise that God will surely hear and answer our prayers. *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much* (James 5:16). *Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive* (Matthew 21:22). *This is the confidence that we have in God, that if we ask anything according to God's will, God hears us. And if we know that God hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of God* (1 John 5:14-15).

Yet our prayers are not always answered quickly, on our preferred timetable. For reasons that are supremely wise, and gracious, and right – but often known and unexplained to us – God sometimes delays answering our prayers. Yet Jesus encourages us to keep praying with persistence and passion, never losing faith and not growing faint.

This parable follows a lengthy discourse by Jesus on the Second Coming (Luke 17); it's a frightening prophecy dominated by dire warnings of doom and disaster, culminating in a gruesome image of death: "*Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather*" (Luke 17:37). Our parable begins immediately after that with the words: "*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart*" (Luke 18:1). No matter how bleak the times, says Jesus, even if the whole world is barreling toward doom and eternal judgment, righteous people must persist in prayer in the confidence that God will hear and answer.

While we wait for Jesus to return – especially as the time goes on and the world seems to grow more wicked and more doom-worthy – we are to persist in prayer and not lose heart. This is an encouragement to pray that the Lord will come, and to pray for the strength to endure to the end. Jesus taught his disciples that his return was imminent: it should be expected as a certainty, even if it does not happen right away.

Jesus encouraged the disciples to both watch eagerly and to wait patiently for his return; and as they wait, they are to pray and not lose heart. The expression "lose heart" in Greek (*ekkakēō*) speaks of giving up from exhaustion, or worse, turning coward. The apostle Paul uses the word five times in his letters: "*We do not lose heart*" (2 Corinthians 4:1, 16); "*Let us not grow weary while doing good*" (Galatians 6:9); "*Do not lose heart at my tribulations for you*" (Ephesians 3:13); "*Do not grow weary in doing good*" (2 Thessalonians 3:13). The underlying meaning is always the same: don't give up hope that Jesus will come again.

We are to be like the persistent widow in the parable, holding true to our purpose even when the world ignores us or works against us. We are to persist in prayer, knowing that the God who promises is faithful, even if it takes a long time for those promises to be realized. Meanwhile, God does not delay justice out of any indifference toward us. God delays because God is merciful. The apostle Peter tells us: "*The Lord is not slack concerning God's promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:8-9).

The apparent delay is the measure of God's longsuffering. God is gathering "*a people for God's name*" (Acts 5:14), and God will not shorten the time until every last one of God's elect is saved – though their number be "*a great multitude which no one could*

*number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues”* (Revelation 7:9). In the meantime, we persist in prayer, faithfully working toward the day when Christ comes again.

Jesus ends the parable with these words: *“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he really find faith on the earth?”* (Luke 18:8). It’s a great question! Will Jesus find us persevering in prayer and expectation? Or will he find that many of us “lose heart”?

On this Christ the King Sunday, Christians around the world renew their pledge to pray and to work for God’s promised Kingdom. We who love Christ and long for his appearing must not lose heart. After two thousand years, our hope still burns brightly; our love for Christ is still true and pure; and our confidence that he keeps his word is fast and firm. Therefore, we pray persistently, calling on him to come to vindicate his people, glorify himself, dethrone Satan, establish a righteous kingdom, and bring everlasting peace to the earth.

Christ the King Sunday is the culmination of the church calendar year. We pray relentlessly for Jesus to come and reign as King of kings and Lord of lords and create the eternal new heaven and the new earth. Next week is the First Sunday of Advent, and we pick up the plea of Scripture, “Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come!” That prayer ought to be on our lips perpetually, and that hope should govern all our thoughts. Prayer is the prosthesis, the support that helps us stand firm as we live persistently, faithfully, until Jesus comes again.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you are the One to whom is given all dominion and glory and power. Your voice speaks truth; your life gives power; your love transforms. Your way is holy and just, for you are Ruler above all the kings of the earth. Forgive the fickleness of our feeble loyalty to your reign on earth and by your grace renew our love and faithfulness to you. Move our hearts toward one another so that with one voice we may persistently, faithfully proclaim your rule of steadfast love and peace in this world. Amen

Source:

- Svitil, Kathy A. "Walk like an amputated Egyptian," Discover, April 2001, 12.
- MacArthur, John. “Parables: The Mysteries of God’s Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told.” 2015.

## The Prayer Prosthesis

Sunday, November 25, 2018

Luke 18:1-8

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

She was about 50 years old; an elderly woman for her day. She was in good shape, although a bit dried out. Archaeologists found her in burial chamber TT-95 in the Egyptian necropolis at Thebes-West. For someone buried for three millennia, she looked remarkably well-preserved. Yet even to archaeologists, she was not likely to attract attention because she appeared to be an average, every day, garden-variety mummy...until someone noticed that the big toe on her right foot was totally artificial.

The toe consisted of three pieces of carved wood fitted onto her foot with leather straps. Egyptologists claim it is the world's oldest known prosthesis. For paleopathologists around the world, this big toe was big news. Scans revealed that the Egyptian woman's actual toe was surgically removed. Soft tissue and skin had overgrown the site where the toe had been taken off, and then the prosthetic toe had been added.

She must've been a persistent woman to go to all the trouble! Persistent to have the afflicted toe removed. Persistent to have the prosthetic toe created and fitted. Persistent in learning to walk with this new device. Evidence shows that the device worked: scuff marks on the toe's underside indicate that the artificial toe assisted the woman for some time while she lived. Without it, she would have had a very difficult time walking like an Egyptian.

Persistence is important. Persistence is how we get things done. Most successful people have failed at least once; they succeed because they persist. The world will test your persistence and try to get you to quit. What comes easily normally isn’t worth much; persisting with the hard things is what makes the journey worthwhile. Knowledge is gained through persistence, and the more you do something the better at it you will become. Persistence pays off.