



What's the Point of Prayer?

Luke 18:1-8

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This story is at the heart of one of the most honest questions I am asked — “What’s the point of prayer?” And in an age where the phrase “thoughts and prayers” has become common currency, the question has gotten louder and louder. And now, what often happens is that when someone speaks of thoughts and prayers, a response comes back that goes something like this: “Never mind thoughts and prayers. We want action and change.”

I wish we did not so often see those things as mutually exclusive. Because when evil in this world crops up, I want us to be people who respond, who do everything in our power to make sure whatever it is doesn’t happen again. And at the very same time, when evil in this world crops us, I want us to be people who do not hesitate to bring it to God and say, “Help. Please.”

Jesus told the disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him...”

As many of you know, I used to live in Kansas City, and I remember with remarkable

clarity waking up one day in February, 2017, to hear the news that a hate crime had been committed just down the street in Olathe, Kansas, where many of my church members lived. Srinivas Kuchibhotla and Alok Madasani worked for Garmin, developing aviation technology.

Both of them considered it the job of their dreams. They stopped to get a drink after work one day, when a gunman entered the bar, looked around the room, yelled “Get out of my country!” and opened fire. Both Kuchibhotla and Madasani were shot. Ian Grillot, a stranger to the two men, was shot when he rushed in to help. All three were taken to the hospital. Kuchibhotla died later that evening.

Kuchibhotla’s wife — Sunayana Dumala — when she was interviewed, she said she had asked her husband not that long ago if they should move to another country where they might be safer. He assured her they would be okay. In the midst of her grief, Dumala made a demand of the government: she wants a response to this crime and others like it. “I need an answer,” she said. “I need an answer for everyone out there. Not just for my husband, but for everyone, all those people of any race.”

"I need an answer," she said. Does that sound familiar? In that city there was a widow who kept coming and saying, "Grant me justice..."

Here's some of what we know about the Gospel of Luke. While some of the other gospels were written to Jewish communities, Luke seems to be written primarily to Gentiles ... non-Jews. It is a gospel that wants its readers to understand that God offers life and love, hope and salvation, to Jews and Gentiles alike. It is a gospel written to include those who are thinking they might be left out — and as far as Luke is concerned, that includes not just the Gentiles, but everyone else at the fringes, too: women and children, the poor and the broken and the stranger.

It starts all the way back in the first chapter, with the Magnificat, Mary's prayer to God celebrating that the hungry will be filled, the poor will not go wanting, the weak will be made strong. That theme continues throughout the rest of the gospel, and it is throughout the rest of the gospel that Jesus follows his mama's lead: he prays to God. In fact, by Luke's account, Jesus spends more time praying than he does anything else. He who is justice incarnate? His most predominant action is prayer.

This is instructive to me. And helpful. Because I have to confess to you, that even while a significant portion of my job is to be with you and pray with you, there are moments when not being able to do ... more ... makes me feel incredibly powerless. Not something more like grab a scalpel and scrub in on the surgery; I just often find myself wishing that my prayers could yield predictable (and positive) results.

That's why I need this parable. There are some unhelpful ways to read it, interpretations that suggest if you don't get what you want, if

every door doesn't open for you, you aren't faithful enough. I suppose some might think that's what it says, but that's not what it means. Because here's the thing — the widow in this story is lauded for her persistence. But persistence comes only when it's needed; when despite your best efforts it isn't working out yet. And you only need encouragement to keep going, when someone else understands that you might be ready to give up.

I think that widow was met with an awful lot of silence for an awful long time. I suspect this champion pray-er said a whole lot of prayers that got a whole lot of nothing in response. So hear this word: if you are praying with all your might, and it feels like little more than talking into the wind? You're not doing it wrong. I promise.

We aren't told specifics of the widow's words because her words are not the important part of her prayer. Her persistence is the important part. She insists on justice, which means, she insists that what is wrong, be made right. And that what is broken, be made whole again. That kind of prayer? That kind of determined, honest, faithful prayer? It can change anything. It can even change us.

It was only a week before the shooting in Olathe that I said goodbye to my friend, Scott. It was only five weeks before that that Scott was diagnosed with angiosarcoma. It's a cancer that is as aggressive as it is rare, and it was a situation that seemed as unfair as they come. Scott was a Presbyterian pastor, the same age as me. He was married to Lara, his wife, who he first asked out when they were 15 years old. Four small children completed their family. If you want evidence that sometimes our prayers receive only silence in response, this is it. Despite the prayers of many, including

hundreds of other Presbyterian pastors, which is to say, a whole bunch of professional pray-ers, his condition worsened, rapidly and painfully.

During one of my less eloquent moments of prayer for my friend, I told God, "Sometimes you make really bad choices," even though not one fiber of my being believes God chose for Scott or anyone else for that matter to get sick and suffer. Lara admitted her prayers started in that same place. But over time, she said, as she continued to pray for her beloved, her prayers began to shift. "We need a miracle" became "We need pain management." "Please, no intubation" became "Please, make it possible for just a few last words." "Give us as much time as possible" became "Grant him a quick conclusion." "Let us keep him here with us" became "Let him go home to you."

On February 13, death reared its ugly head. Already confused and intermittently unconscious, Scott still knew what mattered most. In their last exchange, Lara asked him, "Who do you belong to?" And despite everything happening in his body and in his mind, Scott replied, "I belong to God." Finding herself in that moment was not the answer Lara had wanted; but it was the answer she needed. Knowing that Scott knew he was going to be okay.

Prayer has a way of changing us. Prayer can change our hearts and our hopes, because interacting with God in these most vulnerable moments? Whether you are saying "Thank you" or "I hate you," prayer is the way we interact with God. It is one of the ways we look right into the very face of God, and appeal to the very heart of God. Because to encounter the face and heart of God ... is to see that we are beloved, and made in God's image. We see

something of our own reflection, which calls forth our best self — because if we see our own beloved reflection in God's face ... we cannot help but recognize the beloved reflection of others, too.

In that way, when pray, even our most individual, personal prayers ... we are pushed, inevitably and irrevocably, toward one another. To see ourselves in God's image is to see everyone else that way, too. Of course it is. "Our Father," we pray, and those words alone bind us to one another, siblings every one of us. So maybe what we need to remember is that rather than prayer yielding a desired answer, prayer yields a divine connection. It is the way we connect to God. I have no earthly idea what the mechanics of it look like, but maybe that is as it should be, for prayer is the very stuff of heaven, bright, shining, threads that hold us together, connect us to God, and bind us to one another.

I don't know about you, but if that is all that could be said for prayer, I'd still find it well worth our while. I no longer remember who it was, but someone said a prayer is simply words uttered by someone who has realized that life can be overwhelmingly hard.

This story today — it isn't about one persistent widow. It's about three. We don't hear her name in the scripture reading, but sometimes her name is Lara, and sometimes her name is Sunayana Dumala. And I don't know what her name will be tomorrow or next week or the week after that, but she — or he — or they — will be there. I do know that. T.S. Eliot once wrote, "we are only undefeated because we go on trying." And the entirety of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, bears witness to the same, through the grace of God and the love of Jesus Christ.

So friends, keep trying. Keep knocking on the door, until your hand is sore and your knuckles bleed. Keep demanding that what is broken, be made whole, and what is wrong, be made right. Pray without ceasing. Pray without ceasing, because "connection with God is our first concern, our worthiest art, our best resource, and our [deepest] joy."¹ It is our first defense and our last resort. Pray without ceasing, because maybe, just maybe, "prayer will brood over our modern disorder as the Spirit once brooded over the void," and maybe, just maybe, it will change us enough — it will stitch us together with enough shimmering, golden thread — that "[we] will, [indeed], summon forth a new world."²

¹ From *Prayer*, by George Buttrick, Abingdon Press, 1977. For those who may not know: George Buttrick was the second Senior Pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church.

² Buttrick.