

“Why Bother?”
Text: Luke 18:1-8
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“...yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice...” Luke 18:5a

Early on Monday morning, Sara and I met two pastor-friends in the parking lot of Trinity Presbyterian Church and drove up to Cherry Log, Georgia for a preaching workshop led by Emory professor and Presbyterian minister Tom Long. The topic of the workshop proved quite popular, drawing ministers from all over Georgia and from many denominations. The topic (prepare yourselves) was: “The Funeral Sermon.” Now, I know what you are thinking. Only a group of pastors would get hyped up and drive hours to discuss such an electrifying topic.

But the truth is that these pastors are regularly encountering a vocational crisis in this arena. It did not take long before that crisis was named. “What do we clergy do,” one exasperated participant asked, “in a culture whose vision of the funeral service is purely secular?” Another pastor described a disheartening experience he had leading a memorial service in a local funeral home. Throughout the service, during his homily and prayers and scripture readings, a large flat screen television displayed pictures and video clips from the life of the deceased. “It is enough to make you want to give up and let the funeral homes and secular life celebration ceremonies take over,” he said. Why bother? In a time and place that seems increasingly hostile to or uninterested in religious commitment and ritual, why bother?

After years of research and study, Professor Long did not have idealistic answers to such questions. Perhaps better than any of us, he understands what religious leaders and Christian believers are up against. Instead he reminded us of what the Christian funeral, and our rituals in general, have always been about. He explained that, when the surrounding world emphasizes closure and finality, what we have to offer is an opening, a gateway into deeper meaning and significance. For example, he described the reaction that many of us have when someone around us is dying. We don’t know what to say; we don’t know how to respond. All our words and all our feelings seem empty. For people of faith, these are the times when tradition and ritual are most comforting. When we can’t do anything else, we read Psalms and pray prayers and sing hymns. One of the elders of this church often describes the powerful experience of taking communion to members who are in the dying process. The power of our rituals holds us up when nothing else holds.

In a time when being religious seems to be all about knowledge or proper doctrine, (for example the recent religious knowledge survey released by the Pew Forum) it may be time for a return to the practices of our faith. Worship, prayer, song, scripture reading, actions of mercy and justice and compassion and love. Sometimes, it is the practice of faith that sustains us when our minds and hearts just aren’t there.

The gospel writer Luke is not always clear about the purpose of Jesus’ parables. This morning, he is crystal clear. Before the parable begins, he tells us what it means. He starts

with the ending. Jesus told his disciples a story about the need to pray always and not lose heart. The story has two characters: a widow and a judge. The judge is unjust and cruel; having no fear of God or respect for humanity, he refuses to give the widow a just verdict. The widow is persistent and stubborn; convinced that her efforts will one day bring the justice she deserves, she appears before the judge day after day and pleads her case. Can't you see her? Rising every morning before sunrise, dressing silently in her cold empty house, sitting alone before a meager breakfast, and then walking slowly into town, once again, to make her request before the cold-hearted judge. Each day that she is refused, she somehow musters the energy and the passion to rise again and repeat the ritual.

And then, one day, without warning or pageantry, the judge relents. The wall of silence is torn down and she hears those words that she has imagined so many times before. "Your request has been heard, and it is granted."

The parable, again uncharacteristically, is quite explicit in stating the reason for a new verdict. It is not a change of heart, but a strategic response of provoked irritation. "Because this woman keeps bothering me..." I will give her what she wants. Her persistence pays off. Her daily ritual is vindicated.

When we read the parable, it is tempting to identify the judge with God. Many commentators who write on this text do just that. We are the widow. God is the judge. We are commanded to bother God until the divine mind is changed by constant aggravation.

That's not quite right. The move is not parallel (the judge represents God) but progressive. If the judge, who has no fear of God or respect for human beings, responds to persistent request, then how much more will a loving and gracious God respond to the prayers of disciples. Pray always. Don't lose heart.

The judge is not God, but perhaps he is a stand-in for all those nagging doubts and overwhelming fears that keep us on the verge of giving up. "Why bother?" they ask us mockingly. Your prayer will never be answered, your voice will never be heard, you will never receive the assurance of God's presence that you so deeply desire. The judge pushes us to the brink of despair, convincing both heart and mind that our cause is hopeless and our God truant.

But the widow's ritual is a model for us. What do you do when your faith is waning, your confidence lost? What do you do when God seems distant or absent? What do you do when your world is collapsing all around you? The parable makes a suggestion for what to do. Carve out a ritual, praying each morning for yourself and for the world. Come to worship and surround yourself with the prayers and hymns and scriptures of the church. Rest in the practices of faith when the claims of faith simply don't make sense.

If you are angry with God, if you are convinced by the unjust judges of this world that faith is futile and fleeting, you've come to the right place. There is no better place to be when you find yourself screaming, "Why bother" (or a less G-rated synonym) in God's direction. Rest in the ritual of faith, and do not lose heart.

There were times when Morningside Presbyterian Church might have asked, “Why bother?” When the going got tough and dollars and people were scarce and anxiety was high, surely the temptation was to ask one another, “Why do we even bother to do it?” Why open the doors on Sunday morning and polish the silver and prepare for worship when those actions seem in vain? Why did Walter Huff and his choir gather each Wednesday evening and prepare, why did Walter himself come early to turn on lights and heat the building? Why did some of you bother to clean gutters and wash windows and keep the nursery and give to the church? Here’s what I think. You were carving out a ritual. You were holding fast to the practices of faith. You were hurling your words against walls of insignificance and meaninglessness. You were praying so as not to lose heart. And now, preparing for a new chapter in the life of this congregation, it is time to again cling to the practices that make us Christian. Pray. Worship. Sing. Read scripture. Care for one another and for the world. And do not lose heart.

When we commit ourselves to prayer, a strange thing happens. We begin to see cracks in the hard surface of reality. Light streams in and nearly blinds us with its brilliance. All that knocking, all that praying, all that longing and begging and pleading, and something happens. The judge is proven a liar and we are renewed in faith and hope.

Why bother to pray and worship and serve others? Because the practices of faith change us, deepen our relationship with God, and bring us closer to one another.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, author Anne Lamott writes about why she makes her son go to church every Sunday against his six-year old will. She writes, “The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, who practice their faith. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.”ⁱ

I pray because the women and men whose faith in God I admire most are people of deep prayer. One of these people is a man named Ted Purcell, a retired Baptist minister in North Carolina. Ted summed up his lifelong journey with the meaning of prayer in this way, “I used to think that monks and nuns took the easy way out by joining intentional communities and spending all their time in prayer, separate from the “real world.” Fifty years later, I am absolutely convinced that those prayers hold the world together.” I pray because I believe that the church at prayer is the church in action. I believe, with Karl Barth, that to clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of this world, and of our lives.

While a seminary intern at Children’s Hospital, I met a woman whose five-month-old twins had still not left the hospital. Every morning, she was there. Every night, she was there. Holding. Praying. Crying. Waiting. Pleading. Rituals of love and compassion. “What gives you strength?” the wide-eyed novice chaplain asked. With a look that showed wisdom beyond her 19 years, the mother simply responded, “I see a new world coming.”

Don’t lose heart. For God’s sake, don’t give up. A new world is on its way.

ⁱ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Anchor Books, 2000, p. 100