

Keep on a Prayin'

Luke 18:1-8

Sermon by Mag Richer Smith

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*18*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. *2*He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. *3*In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' *4*For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, *5*yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" *6*And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. *7*And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? *8*I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

I met her in Guatemala...

a mother of 8 and a persistent woman!

When she and her husband decided to build a home for their growing family in Guatemala City, she *did* the paper work for access to land and *petitioned* for a building permit and WAITED...

When nothing happened she *kept showing up* at the office that was refusing to let this INDIGINOUS person move ahead on a property.

But she just *kept on bugging* the authorities until her petition was approved.

THEN...through subsequent years (with her babies in tow), she *KEPT* working on behalf of her neighborhood and *petitioning* for access to electricity, then later for running water, then for sewers.

Even though she *got rebuffed* and had monumental hassles, those in power finally gave in and gave this woman's neighborhood attention...

just to get her off their backs!

Then later, with more persistence her request for paved streets was also granted.

For 34 years, this woman kept banging on the doors of power and thus...improved the lifestyle of many.

But then people from a different background found her home desirable and posed death threats to her and her now young adult children if they would NOT LEAVE.

And finally, *afraid* for the lives of her loved ones, this woman and her family *packed up their belongings* in the middle of the night and left their neighborhood for good.

In her prayers, she heard the LORD saying.

"It was only an umbrella."

and then she said,

*"God is everywhere...and love is our true home...
and in THIS Home even enemies are brothers and
sisters. And God can provide another umbrella!"*

I met the persistent woman again through Marilee.

Marilee came to a congregation where Bob and I were pastors, a single mother with a five year old child.

She had NEVER gone to church before, though she had attended Goshen College, a school she had read about in her coastal home and thought it sounded "FAR AWAY."

When Marilee stepped inside our church she told us she had come because of the PERSISTENT PRAYERS of Emma Hartzler. At Goshen College Marilee had taken a job as a reader to this older woman of deep faith who was confined to an iron lung at Greencroft. And when Emma told her that she was

praying for Marilee every day, seeds were planted in Marilee's deepest longing.

So 7 years later she shows up in our congregation and announces, *"I'm here because of Emma Hartzler!"* And later when Marilee was baptized, we heard that same testimony as she expressed gratitude for a persistent woman's prayers.

I've known lots of persistent women and men... People who do not stop praying and believing in God's powerful presence at work in and through them.

Last year I visited Iowa and surprised an old friend in her nursing home room with a visit. There was 92 year old Rachel with her tiny bulletin board in view and my twin grandchildren's pictures were front and center. Rachel (who had five children of her own and plenty of her own grandchildren) had pictures of MY grands in view. And When I asked about that, she said, *"I prayed fervently for them when they were very sick and decided I wasn't going to stop just because they are better, so I just keep on prayin."*

Jesus implores us in the story today to live out our faith by being PERSISTENT in bringing our requests to God.

"In this certain city," Jesus tells us,
*"there is a judge whose heart is as cold as stone
and cares nothing about the needs of the people."*

And in this city there is this woman who is financially destitute, a widow, whose human rights have been stripped

from her. Still, she has enough GUMPTION to just keep banging on the judge's door.

She just keeps bringing her requests to the hard-hearted judge.

"Maybe," she thinks, "IF I bang hard enough and long enough the ears of the deaf can be unstopped and the heart of stone can be melted."

We don't know what motivates her to keep on visiting the judge...likely it is her desperation, and perhaps it is also a faith that GOD can break through the toughest façades. The woman keeps on keeping on, until finally the judge says to himself,

"Even though I have no reason to respect this woman's request, I am going to grant her plea because I am sick and tired of her bothering me. She's a pain in the neck and I want her off my back!"

Then Jesus says,

"Now look here. If this unjust judge (with no trust and no respect) grants this woman's plea...

How much more will the God who LOVES you and desires justice for all who are oppressed...

How much more will our God listen to those who keep on praying!"

HOW MUCH MORE...HOW MUCH MORE
will the SOURCE of grace and mercy provide healing for the earth."

Jesus tells us to keep on bothering GOD!

FIX your SIGHTS on DIVINE POSSIBILITIES
Place Yourselves in the Whirling Wind of God's Spirit.

Storm the gates of heaven on behalf of victims.
Carry the sick, the weak and the little ones on pallets of care
 into the healing presence of Jesus,
 and *deliver* your enemies into the waiting arms of ONE who
 forgives, restores, transforms and makes whole again.
 Lift them and YOURSELVES into the light.
 Align yourselves with the best Hope in the worst situations.
 Because our prayers on behalf of others change us!
 They make us AVAILBLE to BE the good news for which we
 pray. Prayers enable us to keep on releasing what is too
 heavy for us to carry and find strength to endure,
knowing there is no special immunity when it comes to
 trouble and heartache.

When my grandchildren were teetering between life and
 death, a friend wrote: "*Remember, MAG, God never
 promises protection...only presence, sustenance and
 advocacy.*" I didn't like that much because *I WANTED
 "PROTECTION."*

When we pray, "*MY WILL BE DONE*"...
 God is not our servant!

God is no Santa Claus
 who will bring the goodies if we are good enough...
 or the vending machine that is going to cough up our
 desired product.

God is not a puppeteer who will keep pulling strings to
 manipulate the players.
 or a CEO who is calling all the shots!
 So to whom do we pray?

When we pray, we address the God whom Jesus addresses...The Eternal, the Creator, the SOURCE OF LOVE, & the Father & Mother of us all.

We address the God of POWER-YES! and also the GOD who SUFFERS with us... the ONE who *bears the weight* of the world's pain.

We come before a listening heart that *welcomes* our heartcries.

The God I know

walks with us through the storm and the calm
and *makes a way out of no way*,
offering LIGHT in darkness and LIFE in dying.

THIS GOD extends a NET OF LOVE underneath our worst and offers *mercy upon mercy*.

And to pray to this God is to align ourselves with the ONE whose ways we often cannot know, but whom we can always TRUST to BE LOVE.

In our passage today, Jesus tells us to never STOP *haggling* with God for the sake of our children, on behalf of the sick, the poor, the victims and the on behalf of the world God so loves.

Jesus is saying,

"Don't stop rattling God's cage on behalf of those who ache! WAKE GOD UP!"

But we have a problem here, because it seems sometimes like God stays asleep.

Sometimes we wonder if our prayers make ANY difference.

What good does it do to keep on a prayin'

- when NOTHING seems to change
- when pain doesn't go away
- when bigotry looms from the mouths of our leaders
- and immigrants are rejected
- and women are mistreated while abusers are elevated
- and the most vulnerable are trampled on by the powerful and the wealthy!
- and wars go on.
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Someone asked me recently,

"How can I love and Pray for this President,"

and my first response was, "PRAY FOR TRUTH TO BE EXPOSED," because lies hurt the one who utters them and hiding in falsehoods is miserable ... to love our President is to pray for TRUTH TO BE EXPOSED!

To pray to the GOD OF LOVE is to refuse to be complicit with all that is doing harm, even when we hear nothing in response.

In the prayer manual of the Bible, the Psalmists (our prayer teachers) urge us to pray our heartcries & frustrations:

How long, O Lord, will you forget us?

Why do you stand so far off?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep!

Has your steadfast love ceased to exist?

These are the kind of questions we can ask when we have an intimate & secure relationship with ONE who is *committed to us* no matter what...

The Psalmists do not stop trusting even a silent God.

They just keep on prayin' ...

not because of all the great answers they receive, but because they *choose to TRUST* a God who is LARGE enough and LOVING enough to receive our questions, anger and anxiety.

Jesus tells us in the story today...

“Keep on bringing your needs to God.

And keep on *crying out for Justice and Peace* for this earth.

Refuse to be complicit in WHAT IS!

In his own prayer of intercession (in John 17) Jesus mentions the “WORLD” 18 times, far more than anything else.

“Keep on *praying for the WORLD and for its healing.*”

WHY PRAY?

(when nothing seems to be changing for the good)

Why should we keep on bothering an inefficient God?

We need an eschatology to be a people of prayer.

We need the Resurrected Jesus so that we can keep on trusting that

*“Though the wrong seems off so strong,
GOD IS the ruler yet!”*

We need to remember that GOD is always on the side of HEALING (which does not mean I’m going to get all the temporary cures that I ask for), but which does mean the trajectory of God’s kingdom is toward wholeness. AND GOD wills shalom and salvation for all.

We need to picture that long ARC of the MORAL UNIVERSE BENDING TOWARD JUSTICE.” & keep IMAGINING the new world coming where *everyone is free..*

So...*keep on banging on the door* of the ONE whose creation will be healed at last.
keep on praying for those who suffer,
Aligning your will with the heart of the Divine, knowing
 GOD's LOVE responds to the world's needs
 and God's love alive in praying, trusting, longing people will
 address what is unjust.

And so we hear Jesus saying today:

"When the Son of Man comes
 will he find men and women who are praying

- who have not given up?
- who have not lost heart?
- who still have faith and hold out hope for all that is so screwed up?

If this unjust judge (who does not even care) can cough up
 good gifts...

Then please, people of God,
keep on rattling the cage of the Source of Love!

Be persistent like the Guatemalan mother who (when all for
 which she had worked for 34 years was lost) still knows that
 God is her home...and all that other stuff was just an
umbrella!

Keep on praying...because years from now (when we are
 long gone from this earth), a new generation is going to
 show up in a church somewhere, looking for the liberation
 of Jesus and announcing,
*"I'm here because of the persistent people who kept on a
 prayin!*

And may we all have a bulletin board in our hearts today
with pictures of those for whom we are being called to pray.
and keep on a prayin' for one another,
for the destitute people and situations on this earth
and for ourselves to BE the Healing God desires.
KEEP ON KEEPING ON!