Today we hear a seemingly simple story about the power of prayer. As Jesus tells this pithy and pointed story, an aggrieved and determined widow comes to a crooked and lazy judge who has no respect for God or for people.

The widow demands that the crooked judge give her justice against an unnamed opponent. We don’t know what her grievance is about – it doesn’t really matter. Though he is a crook, the judge grants her request because she is a pest. The moral of the story:

That if a crooked judge grants the wishes of a persistent widow, how much more will God grant the wishes of those who “pray and not lose heart.”

In other words, be a pest with God.

Now, as I read this parable this week, I must admit I was tempted to re-write it as an allegory about, let’s say, certain political leaders in Washington. Insert the name of your choice.

But let’s not go there.

Outwardly, the parable has problems, so let’s take a closer look. Is Jesus really saying that God is only just a little better than the crooked judge?

Has Jesus set the bar that low?

That’s the first problem with this parable, and we are just getting started.

On the surface, the parable seems to be saying, “pray harder and you will get whatever you want.”

This surface reading can lead us down a selfish, narcissistic path. It sounds like, if you pray just right, and hard enough, you will get that red Corvette.

But we know it isn’t that simple. It doesn’t always work out that way. We don’t always get the red Corvette no matter how hard we pray.

More seriously, we may pray fervently and persistently for healing for a loved one who is gravely ill, but our loved one doesn’t get better.

We may pray fervently and persistently that we will receive forgiveness from someone we have harmed, but forgiveness never comes.
We may pray fervently and persistently for an end to poverty, but people remain poor.

And that raises a question: Why pray?

The Early Church struggled with this question and came up with this solution: That God’s time is not our time, and that at end of time all the correct prayers will be answered while the prayers that aren’t answered are the ones not worth answering – like the red Corvette.

But I find that not very satisfying, and it doesn’t really fit with this parable.

In the parable, Jesus declares that prayers for justice will be answered, and without delay.

But surely Jesus know what we know – that justice doesn’t always happen, and justice rarely happens quickly.

So, let’s step back a few paces.

To really get the richness of this parable, we need to go a little deeper and ask: What is prayer, and what are the ways in which we pray?

When I ask that question in groups, usually someone will say, the “words in the prayer book, and words that we make up,” and that is correct.

But there are more ways to pray than words.

When we sing hymns, we are praying.

When we listen to music with no words, that can be prayer.

We stand, kneel, sit, or maked the sign of the Cross, we are praying with our bodies and our gestures.

We might pray with our eyes, contemplating art or icons, or religious symbols, like the cross.

And there are even more ways to prayer.

We even pray with our sense of taste and smell by sharing in the bread and wine of our Holy Eucharist.

When we feel the bread in our hands, we are praying. When we bring the cup to our lips, we are praying.

With all our senses we bring our whole being to prayer, and we are transformed by our prayer.

The deepest purpose of prayer isn’t for us to give advice to God, as if God needs our advice.

Rather, in praying to God, it is God who is really praying to us.

And that makes prayer the foundation of our life, both as individuals and as a community.

When we pray about those who are hurting, it is God who wants us to know that people are hurting.
When we pray for healing for someone, it is God who wants us to be the healers.
When we pray for forgiveness, it is God who wants us to forgive.
When we pray for justice, it is God who wants us to render justice.
When we pray for peace, it is God who wants us to be the peacemakers.
And when we ask God to love us, it is God who wants us to love each other.

The deepest purpose of prayer is for us to fully experience the love God has for us, and to be transformed by this experience, and then transform the world around us.

There is even prayer in the silence.
Some of us practice centering prayer by stilling our minds long enough to feel the holy within us.

We tend to think of meditation as an Eastern religious practice. But contemplative prayer has been foundational to Christianity from the earliest times, though, sadly, we don’t talk much about it.

Our Christian tradition is filled with spiritual masters whose contemplative prayers stretch across the centuries:
  Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila in the Middle Ages, Thomas Merton in the 20th century, to name a few.

A week ago, we hosted author Doug Abrams. He wrote a book about a conversation with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama.¹

Both men are courageous leaders who have changed the world.
In one of their interchanges, Archbishop Tutu asked the Dalai Lama how much time he spends a day in meditation and prayer.
“Five hours,” the Dalai Lama replied.
“Oh, that is too much,” Archbishop Tutu replied.
“How much time do you spend a day in prayer?” the Dalai Lama asked.

“Four hours.”

Not all of us are called to spend four or five hours a day in prayer, but all of us are called to re-connect to the Holy through our daily practice of prayer.

I promise, if you set aside a regular time for prayer each day – however much time you can devote – your life will be richer and more centered than you can possibly imagine – and you will change the world.

I close with this:
Many years ago, in a church not this one, I was struggling to find words for a sermon – I was in a low place and feeling out of place. As Sunday approached, I still had no idea what to say.

Then on Sunday, as I got into the pulpit, still unsure what to say, a member of my choir slipped me a piece of paper with a quote that snapped everything into focus for me.

The quote is from Teresa of Avila, a Spanish mystic who lived in the 16th century. I end by offering you her words:

“Prayer is an act of love. Words are not needed. Even if sickness distracts thoughts, all that is needed is the will to love.”

My friends, pray always, do not lose heart, and may all of our prayers be filled with love, and may we always have the heart, strength and courage to turn this hurting world upside down with our prayer.
AMEN

---