

## PERSEVERE IN PRAYER

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*In that city there was a widow who kept coming to {the judge} and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." (Luke 18:3)*

An old school of pulpit wisdom maintains that every preacher should stand before the congregation with a Bible in one hand and the local newspaper in the other. The point is that the Scriptures and current events should always be in conversation with each other. So if we hold true to the saying and turn to today's headlines, what do we find? We find aggrieved people in courts of law saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent."

In Connecticut, numerous families of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre faced down their opponent Alex Jones. Alex Jones is the conspiracy theorist and radio show host who has spent the past ten years declaring the horrific shooting spree that claimed the lives of twenty children and six educators was all staged. It was an elaborate hoax, he claimed. The children didn't die because they never existed. The grieving parents were all actors being paid by the government. Jones words directed scorn and hatred on the grieving parents, as if mourning the loss of their 1<sup>st</sup> graders wasn't agonizing enough. Finally, when they could take it no more they brought a defamation suit against Jones. On Wednesday the jury ordered Jones to pay the families \$965 million in damages. Has justice been served?

In Florida family members of the seventeen people murdered at Marjorie Stoneham Douglas High School in February of 2018 faced their opponent, Nicholas Cruz, who had already pleaded guilty. What was a stake was the penalty. Would Cruz be sentenced to death, or life in prison without parole? Many of the families who were hoping for the death penalty were bitterly disappointed when the jury handed down the verdict that would spare Cruz's life. Has justice been served?

Finally, this week here in New York City the eyes of the Ukrainian people were on the United Nations, where the General Assembly would vote on a resolution concerning their opponent, Vladimir Putin and Russia. Would the family of civilized nations condemn Russia's criminal invasion of their sovereign neighbor and annexation of land that does not belong to them? Yes, by a vote of 143-5 Russia stood condemned. Who were the five that voted against the resolution? Russia, of course. And North Korea, Nicaragua, Syria, and Belarus. Has justice been served? Can justice ever be served for the people of Ukraine?

We turn now from the headlines to the Scriptures, specifically today's reading from the Gospel of Luke (18:1-8). What do we find? We find a widow in a court of law saying to the judge, "Grant me justice against my opponent." Actually, the lead up to what we often call "The Parable of the Unjust Judge," or "The Parable of the Persistent Widow" is important. Jesus was teaching his disciples about the great Day of the Lord, God's promise to the Jews that evil would not prevail. God would vindicate them against their oppressors. But when and where? Luke implies that the disciples responded impatiently, as if to say they'd been hearing about the Day of the Lord for centuries. When will God grant us justice against our opponents?

In response to the disciple's impatience concerning God's timing, Jesus told a parable about their need to pray always, and not to lose heart. A poor widow had a law suit to settle. We don't know what the case was about, nor the identity of her opponent. In the time and place of

Jesus widows were particularly vulnerable, so we can guess someone was trying to defraud her. But these details are beside the point. What Jesus wanted to highlight was that she couldn't get a hearing from the local judge. The judge, who by his own admission neither feared God nor respected people, couldn't have been bothered with the widow's complaint. What did the widow do? She made a major pest of herself, refusing to give the unjust judge a moment's peace. She persevered until he finally gave in, saying, "*because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice.*" The word translated here as "bothering" is key. It means: *to inflict continuous blows to the eye. To make black and blue.* Apparently the widow's perseverance included a few left hooks to the judge's eye. It's no wonder the judge finally heard the widow's case and settled in her favor.

On first reading we might assume that the parable contradicts any notion of God's goodness. But with the unjust judge, Jesus was making use of a story-telling technique called an anti-hero. Jesus created a scoundrel, not a saint, to make a point about God. The point is this: if even the unjust judge can eventually do the right thing and be a source of blessing, imagine how much more God takes us seriously, hears our prayers, and showers us with blessings. Jesus said, "*Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.*" The parable presents an argument from the lesser to the greater. If even the unjust judge can grant justice, then imagine God's greater readiness and willingness to provide for his children. Don't lose heart. Justice will prevail.

We turn now from the Gospel of Luke to the Book of Genesis, or, as you'll see in a moment, from the boxing ring to the wrestling mat. In Genesis we hear a story about Jacob, who was the son of Isaac and younger brother of Esau. Jacob was a colorful character, no doubt about it. As the second-born son, his place would have been merely to watch his older brother Esau receive the blessing and inheritance of their elderly father, Isaac. But when the time came, Jacob schemed to trick Isaac into blessing him rather than Esau. Jacob stole Esau's birthright, and Esau was furious. Esau became Jacob's opponent. In fact, Esau vowed to kill Jacob, so Jacob fled and the two brothers did not see each other for many years. Both prospered, but in today's reading we find Jacob in great fear. He believed that God had commanded him in a dream to return home. When Esau learned that his scoundrel of a brother was approaching, he called together an army of four-hundred men, presumably to fulfill his murderous vow. As Esau approached, Jacob tried to appease him, then sent his family off into safety. That night, *Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

Jacob wrestled with God. The scene certainly raises more questions than it answers. Are we to take it literally or figuratively? Why did God wrestle with Jacob? Why didn't God simply overwhelm Jacob? The text leaves much to the imagination. Still, many people find the notion appealing. We *want* to wrestle with God, especially when we stare in the face of evil, and evil seems to prosper. What Genesis reveals is that God is big enough to take it, and indeed blesses the struggle. God took Jacob so seriously that he climbed into the ring to contend with him on his level. At daybreak God blessed Jacob with a new name: Israel. "*You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.*" Imagine, the name God gives to his chosen people – the name Israel – means "struggles with God," wrestles with God, contends with God. God blesses those who struggle with him. God even worked reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. God is planning to make all things right. So take heart and persevere in prayer.

The question is, do these images of prayer inspire you to pray, or do they exhaust you? Is prayer to be like a boxing match in which we badger and pester God out of divine indifference, and finally win for ourselves the just and favorable outcomes we deserve? Is prayer to be like a

wrestling match in which we clamp such a hold on God that God's only choice is to bless us? No. While much may be said to commend perseverance in prayer, its purpose is never to arouse a slumbering God into action on our behalf. As we recited in Psalm 121 today: *Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.* So we persist in prayer not to force God into being good, as if God doesn't know what we need before we ask. Rather, we persist in prayer precisely because God is good. We persist in prayer not so much to obtain blessings from God, but in thanksgiving that God has already blessed us beyond imagining. God has blessed us with life and salvation, with memory, reason, and skill. It's the goodness of God that awakens our prayers, not the other way around.

I think of Julian of Norwich, the secluded English mystic of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. When she was a young woman she suffered a terrible illness that brought her close to death. A priest came to administer last rites, after which Julian experienced sixteen visions, or revelations of Jesus. Some days later she recovered and wrote out the visions, which today survive as a book called *Revelations of Divine Love*. She has much to say about prayer and the goodness of God. Prayer, she writes, is *cleaving to the goodness of God. To know the goodness of God is the highest prayer of all, and it is a prayer that accommodates itself to our most lowly needs. God does not despise the work of his hands, nor does he disdain to serve us, however lowly our natural need may be. He loves the soul he has made in his own likeness. Our Lord is greatly cheered by our prayer. He looks for it, and he wants it.*<sup>1</sup>

If neither a 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, nor a persistent widow, nor the grappling Jacob inspire your soul, then allow me to offer another image of what prayer can be like. One of my favorite historians and authors is Doris Kearns Goodwin, whose book *Wait Till Next Year* tells of her growing up years in Brooklyn in the 1940s and 50s. She and her father were avid fans of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and even as a little girl she would listen to every game on the radio and keep score of every batter. In those days most of the games were played during the day, when Doris' father was at work. Thus she concluded that he would miss the game unless she told him about it, inning by inning. Every night after supper it became their ritual. He would examine the scoresheet with her and ask her questions: How many hits did Roy Campanella get? How did Jackie Robinson score that run? She would tell him with great excitement and he would smile.

She writes how the nightly recounting of the day's contest at Ebbets Field went on for an entire summer. What her father never told her was that he already knew the outcome of every game. He had studied the box scores in the sports pages of the paper on the train ride home from work. Doris Kearns Goodwin thought she was imparting information to her father that he didn't know and surely needed. At the same time her father was merely delighting in the connection he had with his daughter, and enjoying the time that he could share with her.

I believe the little scene can be a parable from the lesser to the greater, and teach us much about prayer. Yes, prayer can be like a boxing ring or a wrestling mat where we demand justice from God. But even more, prayer is like a child at home enjoying the listening ear of a loving parent. *Our Lord is greatly cheered by our prayer. He looks for it, and he wants it.*<sup>2</sup>

See how a father smiles upon the child he loves. *And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.*"

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<sup>1</sup> *From the Fathers to the Churches*, Collins Publications, 1983, pp. 562-563.