

‘I’m Not Leaving ‘til You Help Me’ Prayers Luke 18:1-8

Sermon by Jan Edmiston
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You’ve probably never heard of Zack Sinclair but he is a contemporary version of the persistent widow. After seeing *The Passion of the Christ* Zack Sinclair felt the burning urge to pray with Mel Gibson. He didn’t want money. He didn’t want to be best friends. He just wanted to pray with this man who had captured the passion of Christ on film.¹

First he wrote letters to Mel Gibson. Then he showed up – twice – at Gibson’s Malibu home, somehow avoiding the security gate. The first time he was told simply that Mr. Gibson was unavailable. The second time he was escorted out by security guards.

Undeterred, Zack Sinclair showed up at Mel Gibson’s church during worship.
What better time to pray with someone than during worship in a church building?

But it didn’t go well. Gibson was quoted as saying, “He ‘approached me, he interrupted my worship, he stood extremely close from me and he demanded that I pray with him.’”

No praying ensued. Instead Zack Sinclair was arrested and a restraining order was issued in hopes of keeping him at least 150 yards away from Gibson, his wife, and any of his seven children.

Unwilling to take “no” for an answer, Sinclair went back to Plan B. He visited the Gibson home again at which point he was arrested a second time, and jailed. And at this writing, Zack Sinclair is scheduled to stand before a judge later this month.²

What was considered simple persistence in the first century will get you arrested in the 21st century. But there are other things to consider as well:

This story of the widow and the unjust judge never really happened in the first century. Jesus was telling a parable – a story with a theological message attached – and for all we know, this woman might have been arrested in first century too, had she nagged a real, live judge the way this woman did.

Jesus’ parable goes like this: A widow believes she is being treated unfairly. In legal terms she could have been the plaintiff; she could have been the defendant. We don’t really know anything about the widow’s case.

¹ “The Passion of Mel’s Fan”, *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2004, page C3.

²CNN website: <http://www.cnn.com/2004/SHOWBIZ/Movies/10/12/gibson.stalker.ap/>

All we know is that she is seeking justice and, *as a widow*, she has no one else to fend for her. (A “true widow” in Biblical terms was not merely a woman whose husband has died; a “true widow” was one without any other people in her life to help her out – no children, no siblings, no parents.³) She has no place else to go. This judge is her only hope.

But he has no compassion, no respect for anyone. (*We hear that he doesn't even fear God!*) He has no time for this widow with legal problems. But she is *so* persistent and so clearly *unwilling to leave* until she finds justice, that he hears her case so that she'll leave him alone.

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Jesus tells this parable *not* to illustrate what God is *like*, but to show us *what God is not like*. God is not like this unjust judge.

The God who loves us is actually **waiting** to hear our prayers. God would *love* for us to feel so determined about justice. God would *love* for us to care enough about something to the point that we pray day and night about it.

The point of this parable is not to teach us about the world's justice system. The point is to remind us to “pray always and don't lose heart.”

When was the last time we sought out God as tirelessly as the persistent widow sought out this unjust judge? Jesus wonders, as he's standing there telling this parable:

when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

When was the last time we prayed “I'm-not-leaving-til-you-help-me-prayers”? I'm not leaving this pew. I'm not getting up from my knees. I'm not going to stop praying until you help me, God. You are the only One who can help me, and I believe you will.

When did we last pray like that? God knows there are situations in the world that require this kind of prayer.

I'm not talking about prayers for the Red Sox whose faithful fans are among the best pray-ers. (Although did you see that score last night? Ouch. Red Sox 8. Yankees 19) That kind of score will either made their fans immediately fall to the knees praying for justice, OR they might just lose their faith altogether.

There are baseball fans who believe that beating the Yankees is a justice issue. But that's not what I'm talking about.

³ 1 Timothy 5:3ff

I'm talking about prayers that burn at our souls and keep us on our knees until the world is different, until this church is different, until that restless, stress-riddled place in the deepest parts of our souls is different.

God is waiting, waiting to hear us pray those prayers, because it shows that we *get* it. To pray always without losing heart means that **we believe somebody is listening**. Our prayers are not falling on deaf ears.

And we believe that the One listening is fair and loving and just.

Everyone of us has witnessed this scene in a toy store:

A child sees something he or she wants.
 The child asks for it. The parent says "no."
 The child whines for it. The parent says "no".
 The child kicks and huffs and puffs. The parent says "no."
 The child throws a grand mal tantrum.
 Kicking. Screaming. Spitting. Drooling.
 Falling to the floor like melting jello.

Most parents will still say "no" and remove the child from the store. But there will always be a parent who begrudgingly tosses the toy into the cart for the very persistent (some would say obnoxious) child.

Praying fervent prayers is not like this. God is not waiting for us to nag and beg for toys. Jesus is talking here about justice, about giving us what is fair in the perfect realm of God.

There might indeed be times when we want to scream and shake our fists at God. If things don't make sense to us, if everything inside us just can't understand why something has happened – maybe *we* will want to kick and scream and spit.

Jesus is trying to tell us here not to lose heart.

It's so easy to lose heart. But what keeps us hopeful, what keeps us faithful is realizing that the God we are talking to when we pray is loving and just. And even if something doesn't make sense to *us*, we have to trust that ultimately, God will be just.

Faith involves believing even when we do not see *how in the world* God can work something out. When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

This morning – once again – we baptize another child. And this is not merely a family event. This is not a sentimental event. This is not an event planned to bring a moment of warmth and sweetness to worship (although it always does.)

The baptism of any person is an act of faith. Two parents will stand before you and state that **they plan to raise their child to have faith when the Son of Man comes**, that no matter what happens to them or to their child, no matter what happens in the world – they will trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. These are awesome words that we do not take lightly.

These parents will promise to pray *for* and *with* their child, and there will be moments in the future when they will pray harder than other times. They will pray for her safety and her health and her future. They will pray for her friends and her teachers. But I trust they will also pray for her soul – that she might one day understand how much God loves her.

When we know *that*, when we know how much God loves us then we can endure even the world's injustice. This is not to say that we sit back and allow injustice to continue. **Please understand:** Jesus was all about making things right on earth – pulling up the poor, defending those who cannot defend themselves, serving with integrity and expecting integrity from others.

But in Christ, we also believe that God will ultimately judge all of us – those who gained unfairly, those who demonized their opponents, those who took advantage of the weak, those who did not keep their promises, those who looked out only for themselves.

Between terrorism and war and flu shots and the most volatile presidential campaign most of us can remember, it might be easier than usual to lose heart. We are in great need of prayer.

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? Or will he find people who don't even care enough to fold their hands, much less fall to their knees?

Let us pray:

Grant us, Lord, the faith to pray without ceasing, the faith to seek you even when you seem far away, the faith to hang on in the most stressful of times. Grant us such faith in the name of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.