

“We Can Always Pray and Not Lose Heart”

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1).

I don't like cats. I'm not proud of it, but it's the truth and for the last eleven years we have had a cat. He was given to us just before Reformation Day and so my daughters appropriately gave him the name Luther. Luther and I have an understanding that allows us to live under the same roof: I don't bother Luther and he stays out of my way and for the most part we coexist peacefully...except for Sunday mornings.

Now you have to understand that Sunday mornings are sacred to me. By the time people start arriving for church around 7:30 I want to be wide awake and ready to welcome them. So this means that I usually get up a little before 5:00 and after getting showered and dressed for the day I have a routine that helps me get going. First, I make my breakfast and pour myself a nice cup of coffee and then I sit down at the computer and read from several websites until right around 6:00 when I head to church. It's a time for me to be totally alone with my thoughts and savor a few minutes of peace before a busy Sunday morning takes over...but without fail, Luther ruins my quiet time.

Like clockwork, as soon as I sit down at the computer to read, Luther plants himself next to my chair and then begins to meow. I should expect this by now, but for some reason it never fails to offend me. For the first few minutes I'm able to ignore his whining, but soon it starts to get under my skin. Indignant and resolved not to give in to his crying, I shoo him away...I tell him to be quiet...but there he sits, inches away from my feet, staring up at me and he meows and meows and meows. Finally, after five or six minutes of incessant meowing I get up defeated and begrudgingly dump a scoop of cat food into his bowl and then for the next week, Luther and I go back to avoiding each other.

In today's text, Jesus uses an equally odd story to teach us something about God and, in the first verse of our reading, Luke spells out the reason behind it. He writes, "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Now, in order for us to make sense of Luke's explicit statement of purpose, we need to have an understanding of the context in which Jesus told this parable and that information is found in chapter 17. Here Jesus teaches His disciples about Judgment Day and He tells them in frightening language that, "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man."²⁷ They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building,²⁹ but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—³⁰ so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed" (Luke 17:26-30). Jesus then follows these Old Testament images of destruction by telling them that the coming of the Son of Man will be a day separation and that many will not be saved.

If you put yourself in the place of the disciples as they listened to these ominous words from Jesus you can imagine the fear they must have felt and, to put it simply, they must have wondered what this meant for them. They must have questioned whether or not they themselves would be saved from the wrath that Jesus had been describing, and in their panic they even ask Him, "Where, Lord? Where is this going to happen?" (Luke 17:37). In response to their understandable alarm and desperate question Jesus then goes right into the parable from today's Gospel reading and Luke tells us exactly why He does it: So that they will keep praying and not give up! So that they will endure in faith to the end! So that they will continue to turn to the Lord and depend on Him for life and salvation! So that they "ought to always pray and not lose heart" Jesus told them this parable: "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'"

There could be no greater contrast than the one between these two characters. The judge held a position of power and the widow was the epitome of helplessness. And, as if this distinction wasn't enough, Jesus also tells us that the judge was a wicked man who didn't fear God or care about people. It was a bleak and hopeless

picture for the powerless widow. An appeal to his compassion would have fallen on deaf ears and this judge wouldn't even have been swayed by a plea based on God's law...*but this woman was persistent!* She knew that her case was just and she would not give up. Again and again and again she kept coming to the unrighteous judge until finally, to shut her up, he gave in to her persistent whining and ruled in her favor. He gave her what she needed, not because he cared about her or for the law, but because she would not give up.

That's the story. And I'm sure that this bizarre parable left the disciples scratching their heads in the same way it leaves us scratching ours. Why would Jesus use a picture of a wicked judge – or a resentful cat owner for that matter – to teach us anything about the character of God!?! It's a shocking parable...and that's exactly the point! With the confused disciples trying to make sense of a very worldly story Jesus reveals the key as He tells them, "Listen to what the unjust judge says." You see, this judge was not moved to action because he feared God. This judge wasn't interested in the well-being of some poor widow. This unrighteous judge had no concern for doing what was right and just. He was motivated to act only because his own comfort and well-being had been compromised. The point of the story is that this unrighteous judge is the polar opposite of what God is like!

If a judge who has no fear of God *or* compassion for his fellow man can be persuaded to offer help by persistent petitions from a widow he hates...*then how much more will God help his own children!* And here, the words of Jesus must be heard! Listen to His language from verse seven: "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?" Did you hear that title!?! In Christ, we are elect! In Christ, we are people whom God has chosen! We have been hand-picked by the creator of the universe to be His own and there is no more beautiful expression of God's saving grace than this! We have been pulled out of the darkness of sin. We have been adopted as children and we have been made heirs of eternal life. God has set His favor on us fully and freely and in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus have been justified and made right with God for all eternity.

In Jesus, God is for us in every way and, as Paul writes in Romans 8, "if God is for us who can be against us?" So, Jesus argues, if an unrighteous judge can be moved by persistent petitions to help a stranger for whom he couldn't care less, how much more "will God help his own chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily" (Luke 18:7-8).

And this message of grace brings us to the final word from today's text. As Jesus teaches this lesson on the overwhelming love of a righteous God for us helpless sinners, He makes a statement that needs some fleshing out. At the end of verse eight He says, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Remember, this parable was directly connected to words about Judgment Day when the Son of Man will return to separate believers and unbelievers and as Jesus concludes a parable that has eternal implications, He returns to the premise from which He began and His rhetorical question about finding faith on the earth points them right back to the persistent widow who will not give up! Remember verse one! Jesus told them this parable so that they would always pray and not lose heart. So that they would not give up! So that they would remain in the faith they had been given by the Spirit of God and, through this unique parable, Jesus tells us that faith and prayer always go together. Faith enables our prayer and prayer strengthens our faith and, like we see in the widow from the parable, these spiritual realities that are ours because of Christ are always expressed in the face of impossible circumstances.

What does the Spirit of God tell us about prayer? In Romans He says, "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer" (Romans 12:12). In Philippians God says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition present your requests to God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding will guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). And in I Thessalonians 5 we are told, "Rejoice always,¹⁷ pray without ceasing,¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." My Brothers and Sisters, faith and prayer always go together! They are gifts of the Holy Spirit that enable us – even in impossible circumstances – to "be sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). And today, God promises us that we can always pray, certain that in Christ God will answer His chosen ones...and He will answer speedily. So do not lose heart and do not give up. God's promises to you in Christ will never fail. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold