

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

TELLING IT TO SOMEONE WHO CARES

Luke 18:1-8

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Analysis by Ronald C. Neustadt

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord 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. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

DIAGNOSIS: Who Cares?

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Not Praying*

Sometimes it happens literally. We stop praying. We don't tell God what we think or feel or want or need. We don't praise or give thanks or make requests for ourselves or for others. We simply begin our days, our work, our meals (and sometimes even our meetings with fellow Christians), by getting down to

business. And in like manner we end our days, our work, our meals, and our meetings by moving on to the next thing.

Or maybe it happens in ways that are not so literal. Sometimes we stop praying even when we continue to say the religious words. It doesn't even matter whether the religious words we use are prepared words that we recite again and again or whether they are religious words spoken on the spur of the moment. We stop praying also when we say religious words (prepared or spontaneous) simply because we know we are supposed to, or because we imagine it's a way to manipulate God, or because "it can't hurt." When lips and heart don't match, we've stopped praying no matter how religious our words (cf. Isa. 29:13).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Not Trusting (Losing Heart)*

So what's behind our not praying (whether we say religious words or nothing at all)? Luke points to the deeper problem in the first line of our text: **Jesus told a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.**

There it is. The opposite of praying is "losing heart," i.e. not trusting, not hanging our hearts on God. Yet, again and again, that's what happens. We do lose heart. We live our lives without trust in God. We figure that telling it to God doesn't matter because ultimately we're going to need to rely upon ourselves anyway. And the world reinforces our conclusion. Again and again the world, like the judge in the parable, sends us away: "Tell it to someone who cares." Usually it is not stated so crudely, but we get the message. We even pass that message on to others, although most of us know how to do it ever so politely.

We stop praying when we figure that telling it to God is like telling it to the judge in the parable. We stop praying—whether we say the religious words or not—because we lose heart. After

all, why keep praying if you don't trust the one to whom you're praying in the first place? [No wonder Jesus wonders if the Son of Man will **find faith on earth when he comes.**]

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Not Receiving*

And therein lies the greatest problem of all. How can we receive the good God has to offer us if we will not trust God? No wonder Jesus says (just a few verses later in this chapter), "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Relying so much on others as they do, children know how to receive gifts. If we insist on relying on ourselves (i.e. losing heart / not praying), what else can God say to us except, "But then you will have nothing."

If we insist on hanging our hearts on ourselves, in the end there will be nothing left to hang our hearts on. Nothing left to trust in. And that's what we will end up with: nothing.

PROGNOSIS: Look Who Does Care!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Persistent Offering*

Yet even in the face of our rejection, God keeps offering. And, as it turns out, what God offers us is even better than the "justice" that the widow begged of the judge. (Look at the parable right after this one, the "Pharisee and the publican.") What God offers in Jesus is mercy for sinners! Mercy even for those (all of us) who have stopped praying / stopped trusting / lost heart.

Jesus is not naïve, of course. He is aware of the consequences of his persistence in showing mercy and forgiving sinners. He even takes the twelve aside and spells it out for them: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. He will be handed over . . ." (v. 31 ff.). They didn't understand but even

that did not stop him. The point is this: **He did not lose heart**. He trusted that mercy was his father's will, and he trusted it no matter the cost. He did not lose heart. Which is to say, He prayed. Again and again, he prayed. Luke especially wants us to know that. Jesus did not lose heart. He never backed off from offering mercy to us.

And it was the Father's good pleasure to raise him from the dead. See how determined God is to have us know how much God cares for us! See how much God cares for you!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Taking Heart*

When God gets it through to us how committed God is to offer us mercy and forgiveness, that's what makes it possible for us to take heart again. By coming to us again and again with the Promise of mercy, God creates (and re-creates) a new heart within us, a "clean heart," i.e. a heart that relies on God's promise to us rather than on ourselves.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Telling It to the One Who Cares*

And with that new heart, we find ourselves (once again) able to pray. We find ourselves able to respond to God's promise to us with trust, which is the *sine qua non* of prayer. We find ourselves able to address God (not as the desperate woman addressed the judge, but as dear children address their loving parents, confident that those parents will provide what they need). We may address God with ancient prayers that we have made our own or with prayers that are blurted out on the spur of the moment. But the form or the phrasing does not matter when those prayers come from the new heart (a trusting one) that God creates in us through the promise God makes to us in Jesus.