

Today we begin a brief series of sermons on prayer. Today and the next two Sundays, we will look at what is an essential, life-giving part of who we are as Christians – prayer.

(READ Luke 18:1-8)

“How long, O Lord?”

This was the question the disciples were dealing with and why Jesus had to tell the story – his disciples were giving up in prayer, surrendering to the silence, maybe – that’s why, at the end, Jesus ties it all together with faith – “will the Son of Man find faith on earth?”

They had asked and had not received, had sought and not found, had knocked and nothing had opened.

It’s happened to you. It’s happened to me.
“How long, O Lord,” we cry with the psalmist.

We pray and we wait and we pray and we wonder – “God, are you listening?”

For if we don’t believe God is listening, then why keep at it? John Calvin called prayer, “the chief exercise of our faith.”

But if our exercise of faith isn’t getting us anywhere, or so it seems, then just like any exercise regimen that doesn’t show results, why keep at it?

For the disciples and you and me, faithful as we all are – How long? There comes a time when we’re ready to pack it in and go home, when we’re about to lose heart.

That’s why Jesus told the story the first time and it is why we need to hear it again for the first time.

Let’s look at our story again: It is obvious in our story that the widow was not sure that the judge was getting her message. It would have been understandable for her to give up.

After all, the judge is described in no uncertain terms as a godless man who had no respect for people. In fact, we’re told that he deliberately ignored her, but eventually, she got on his very last nerve, and he responded to her just to get rid of her.

Now we know, don’t we, that God is not like this arrogant, rude, heartless judge. God is neither petty nor arbitrary – Jesus says, “Listen to what the judge says” – if this kind of judge listens and responds, then how much more God listens and responds, and very specifically, with justice.

We know that, don’t we? Don’t we?

That’s why Jesus frames this story about prayer in terms of faith: that you know and pray because God is always present for you, watching, listening.

I think it begins by understanding the purpose of prayer.

We pray for many reasons:

- we have problems and need help;
- we have sinned and need forgiveness;
- we have decisions to make and need guidance;
- we are afraid and need courage;
- we are weak and need power;
- we are sick and need healing;
- we are sad and need comforting;
- we are confused and need understanding;
- we are happy and need to express gratitude;
- we are dying and need assurance all will be well.

There are many reasons to pray.

However, there is but one purpose of prayer and that is to develop and maintain a close relationship with God for justice.

We pray knowing that God's will cannot be defined by what we ask for or passionately desire as an answer.

We pray into the mystery of God's will which keeps us free for the future God has for you and me.

Jesus is telling us that prayer is all about the God to whom we pray and about our faith in that God.

Look back out our psalm – the psalmist cries, “How long? Consider and answer me...” Yet there is no indication of an answer, is there...just the anguish of the psalmist, and then at the end – FAITH.

“But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me”

Did the Psalmist write this because he felt God was on the way to rescue him and deliver him from his troubles?

No, I don't think so. I do believe, however, he expected God to accompany him along his journey, providing what he needed to remain faithful in the midst of adversity.

As big and serious as his problems were, he knew he was not facing them alone. His faith was in a God who, like a good shepherd, would never leave or forsake him. His faith was in a God who is the source of hope and justice.

Look at the word the Psalmist used to describe the nature of God, *Hesed*, “*steadfast love*”.

If a single Hebrew word serves to describe the character of God, it is this word. *Hesed* rolls into one word the concepts of God's grace, mercy, compassion, faithfulness, justice, and love – love that is constant, unconditional, and unchangeable.

So real and powerful was God's love that the Psalmist trusted God with his life, in the good and bad times. It was inconceivable to him that he quit praying or believing.

Instead, he would wait with an expectant hope for God to respond out of His grace and mercy. It was as if the Psalmist said, “I trust you because I know you love me and your love will sustain me.”

Can you say this today with assurance and conviction or are you wondering how you can trust God and hold on to your faith when life is spinning out of control?

How can you keep your hand to the plow, as the old song says, and get on with your life if you're always waiting on God? How can you live with mystery and unanswered questions?

What these scriptures reveal for our faith is that prayer is not about the answers; not measured by whether it works or doesn't work, nor where one ranks on the power grid of prayer.

Prayer is the chief exercise of faith, of keeping the faith regardless of the silence we get.

I'm not saying that prayers are not answered, especially to remember that ‘no’ is an answer or answers come that we don't expect.

But to think about prayer, first and foremost, in terms of answers can be dangerous. It can be tragic.

If we think that prayer is about answers, we may become so bitter about what God has not done for us that we will not let ourselves see what God is doing for us.

Remember the movie *Bruce Almighty*? Jim Carrey's character was given the powers of God and he was overwhelmed by all the prayer requests; so he simply said “yes” to all of them, and the world was turned back to chaos.

I hear you, though: if prayer isn't about answers, what are we to make of the psalmist's plea for an answer from God?

If prayer isn't about answers, then why do we have prayer chains, or prayers of the people with our concerns?

Why do we fall to our knees raising up our deepest desires and revealing our most hidden hurts?

If prayer isn't about answers, why is there so much power in knowing that someone or a whole congregation of "someones" is praying for us?

Why is it so comforting to hear the words, "you are in my prayers?"

Why? Because prayer, in its most fundamental sense, is about our participation in an abiding, trusting, life-giving, sustaining relationship with a God who loves us, knows us.

We keep praying even while we're asking: God, are you listening?

Let me put it another way, as Oswald Chambers said, "The frustrations of silence will be outweighed by the blessings. Believe this."

That's what Jesus is saying, "God loves you with more love than any love you know and God will give that to you."

A little boy was having nightmares, and his father came to his bed, told him, "don't be afraid, you can pray to God."

And the little boy replied, "But I want God with skin on."

Maybe that's it - God doesn't give us explanations, what God gives is *God's own self*.

I think that's what matters more than anything else—knowing that we are not alone.

In our prayers to God, we find the ultimate answer. God gives us God's own self.

We may not receive the relief or healing we hoped for; the door might not open, then again it might not be our door.

But what we do meet is a real God who can carry us through the pain of what is the dark night of a suffering soul.

Now maybe this has not been enough of an answer for you when you ask, "God, are you listening?"

But I come to the end of this sermon with certain firm biblical convictions in place in my life, and I hope you would find a place for them in your life.

One: When I pray, God is listening, I promise you – I will not surrender to the silence.

And, second, when I pray, it is not with a perfect knowledge of God, but it is with a firm desire to seek God's will and have the faith to walk in it.

That's why my next question is, "Am I listening to God?"

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.