

Sermon 24c 2019: Drawing Close to God through Purposeful, Persistent Prayer

Introduction: The Clash of Speed and Prayer in our Lives

The lessons for this morning present one of the great clashes or challenges

In the life of Christian Americans – our need for speed and our desire to pray.

In case you haven't been paying attention, we Americans love speed;

We love when things happen quickly;

We love when our lives come together smoothly and efficiently;

We love fast and we love easy.

Think of all the many products and services which all of us use

That are built around one or both of these qualities.

Millions of microwave ovens have been sold;

Not because it makes food taste better, although bacon and popcorn aren't bad;

But because it's possible to cook things much faster than an oven can.

Remember when we used to write letters to one another and look forward to the mail;

Now we have email, texting, instant messenger, and instagram at our fingertips;

We complain when the coverage isn't good or we drop a call;

Or when the computer takes a minute to boot up rather than seconds.

As a nation, we practically invented fast food and have certainly perfected it;

You and I can get a little 2000 calorie meal at any number of drive-ins in minutes

And we have to adjust ourselves to sitting down for slow food at a restaurant.

But with all the speed, we're also big pray-ers, we Americans;

The Gallup polling organization consistently shows

That 86% of Americans believe in God and 90% of us pray;

I know, funny statistic, more people pray than believe in God;

Makes you wonder who they're praying to;

But it just reinforces the fact that we Americans like to pray.

We pray at church, of course, as long as doesn't take too long;
We pray at meals; we pray for our sports teams;
We'll always have school prayer as long as there are tests in school;
We pray in times of crisis or when we're in trouble;
We pray for guidance and strength;
We pray for those we love;
We pray for almost everything and everyone.

The clash, the problem, the challenge for us American Christians comes
Because the answers to our prayers are not always as speedy as we would like;
And we give up on praying;
Or pray only as a passing gesture or as a last resort;
Because we're not getting the answer we want, when we want.

It's like that old story about the man who slips over a high cliff
And is hanging on to a branch in the cliff's wall to keep from falling;
He looks up and prays out loud, "God, if you're there, help me."

And the voice from heaven responds, "I am here. Let go."
After a moment, the man calls out again, "Is there anyone else up there?"

I think one of the reasons most of us give up too quickly on God answering our prayers
Is that the answers don't come quickly enough for our tastes
And we begin to believe that God is not all that interested in us and we give up.

Prayer is not always like putting money into a soda machine to get our soda;
We say our prayers and God gives us the answer or the circumstance we ask for;
God doesn't often operate that way, though God can;
But instead God calls us into a life of prayer;
Calls us into a relationship that challenges our need for speed.

And if you and I want to experience God at His best:

Creator of all that is, Master of the universe, Redeemer of the world;

Yet intimately interested and involved with your life and mine;

Willing to shape our souls and the world around us through prayer

Then we need to learn another way;

We need to change our habits and slow down

To pray with persistence and with trusting hearts.

Jesus and Prayer and the Parable of the Widow

In the Gospel this morning, we hear Jesus teaching about the need to pray

And specifically to pray with persistence and to not lose heart;

As God's answers may take longer to reveal themselves

And are, at times, different than the answers we think we're seeking.

Now admittedly, Jesus' world was not as fast as our world is today;

Our electronic age of communication and easy travel everywhere

Were hundreds of years in the future;

But the pattern of His life is a practice that still applies to a life with God today.

As we read through the Gospels Sunday by Sunday,

We see a pattern of prayer and action in Jesus' life;

And often times prayer in action as amazing things happen

At the touch of His hand and the sound of His voice.

Jesus' first followers see that Jesus' power and the events happening around them

Are somehow, in some way, linked with Jesus' prayer life;

And they ask Jesus to teach them how to pray;

You may be interested to know that this was the only

Thing Jesus' first followers asked Jesus to teach them.

Other times Jesus teaches them about the life of prayer without their asking

So that it will become the pattern of their daily lives.

And that's what Jesus' is doing in this Sunday's Gospel story
About the widow and the unjust judge.

This is one of the few parables of Jesus

That you don't have to work too hard to understand the meaning;
Because Jesus gives the meaning before telling the story;
Jesus wants His followers then and now to always pray and to not give up.

The clarity of the meaning of this parable, then,

Allows us to look at the widow's behavior toward an unjust judge
To learn how we can be persistent in our prayers to a just and loving God
And to learn a different pattern for our daily lives.

In the story, the widow has a problem, she needs justice,

Justice that the unjust judge has power to grant to her;
It may have been an issue over land or theft
Or something related to her husband's estate;
We don't know what the conflict was;
But we do know she wasn't passive in trying to get it resolved.

The weakest person in Jesus' world, a widow, doesn't sit idly by with her problem

She gets up and approaches the one person who can help her;
That's the first step in a life patterned in prayer.

When you and I face problems in our lives, we have these same two choices;

We can lose heart and let worries cloud our lives and give in;
As we try to figure it out on our own, with our own limited powers;
Or we can pray to God about it;
We can get up and approach the God
Who has the power and the willingness to help us
With anyone and anything.

I have a lot of people in and out of my office over the course of a typical week
Who come to me with problems where they need some help;
Typically, the last thing we consider together is prayer;
When I bring it up, it often brings a little rolling of the person's eyes;
But I can't tell you how often someone has come back later
And told me that was exactly what they needed to do;
And that the crisis and their lives had somehow changed through prayer.

God is interested in us living lives that help us grow and to make a difference for others;
And the surest way to start down that path is to pray over our concerns
To bring them to God and see how God answers them and cares for us.

The second pattern for our lives we can see in the story
Is the pattern of persistence, diligence, even pushiness;
In the parable, the widow keeps on begging the judge to give her justice
She doesn't just ask once and say, "oh well";
She peppers his ears with persistent petitions
Until the unjust judge will do anything to be rid of her and finally gives her what she asks

Many of us pray to God for something big, something important in our lives, once;
And when we don't receive the answer we want immediately, we quit praying;
That's a big mistake.

Jesus uses this story to show God as the opposite of the unjust judge;
To show God as the One who will give us what we ask for out of His love for us;
But also as a way for God to shape our souls and deepen our lives with Him;
Persistence in prayer opens the way for God to work in our lives;
And to help us become who God created us to be.

And even when our prayers seem to go unanswered;
Or the answers aren't exactly what we want, the shaping of our souls continues
When we open our lives to God through prayer.

Jesus promises that God will always answer our prayers

Sometimes in the way we've asked them to be answered with a grand "yes";

Sometimes yes, but not quite now;

And sometimes, by God's grace and goodness and a vision

That is beyond our seeing with a perfect "no".

God always answers your prayers and mine;

But He answers in different ways and always for our good.

Praying Shapes our Souls

The spiritual life is interwoven with our physical lives

And the life lived in prayer requires that we slow down our lives a bit;

Slow down to open the way for God to come into our lives;

Physical time to give thanks and to make our requests known to God;

Physical time for us to see God's hand at work in our lives

And in the world around us.

So I invite you today to set aside your need for speed

And to enter more deeply, more persistently into the life of prayer;

Set aside your worries and pray to God;

Be persistent in making your requests to God;

Listen and watch for God's answers.

The development and growth of our souls will be shallow

Unless we as individuals and we as a community for the world take time to pray;

Jesus promises that our persistence will be rewarded

That we will experience and come to know of God's great love for us;

And that we will be drawn into the life and purposes of God

As we experience and see His hand at work in our lives and in the life of the world.

So pray and do not lose heart. Pray and see just how good the Lord is.

Amen.