

Praying for Justice

Luke 18:1-8

August 8, 2021 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

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Luke 18:1-8 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?”

I invite you to take out your bulletin and look at the image that is on the cover, a person deep in prayer. You can tell just by looking that they are really praying. This is heart prayer, soul prayer. They are not reading a prayer written by someone else, as we read prayers together every Sunday morning. They are not reciting a prayer from memory. This is no mere formality. You can feel the intensity of this prayer. You can feel it.

What do you imagine this prayer is about? When we pray from our hearts, we are putting into God’s hands the things that we can’t fix ourselves. So, we almost always pray for those whose health is at risk. Perhaps this person is praying for a mother who is dying. Perhaps a child is sick and there is no money for medicine. “I’ve done what I can, God. I put it in your hands. Help me. Help me.” That is a heart prayer. We really feel those prayers when we pray them together for one another, and also when we pray alone.

Everyone finds it easiest to pray from the heart for people we know and love. In fact, it is often easier to pray for those we love than to admit that we ourselves need God’s help. So, we tend to focus our prayers on people who are already in our circle of care. We hurt when they hurt. We feel overwhelmed when they are in crisis. We understand how our lives connect to them and how lost we would be without them. It is easy to share this pain with God and to pray with all our heart for God’s help.

It is a little harder, of course, to pray deeply for people we don’t know – for those affected by fire or flood or earthquake, for example. We feel safe here in our snug corner of God’s beautiful Creation, and they are so far away, in Oregon or India or Ethiopia. Unless we have a loved one in the path of the wildfire or flood, we don’t know their faces or their stories, only that they are victims of something terrible. And really, in times of disaster, we are not sure what to ask God for. Sometimes it is clear that the solution to a problem will be through human response, and so we may pray for God to guide us all in helping people rebuild. Those aren’t always comfortable prayers because they pinch us a bit. They demand our action, even if it is only to write a small check to UCC Disaster Services. Sometimes the response that is needed is so much greater than our capacity, we feel overwhelmed and when you get right down to it, we would prefer just to look away, so other people’s trouble doesn’t become our trouble.

It is even more challenging, I think, to pray from the heart for people who are in intractable situations that are caused by other people, or by society, or by forces we can’t really grasp and we certainly can’t control. How do we, who live in the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth and

who have some measure of privilege even here, how do we imagine the life of a five-year-old girl in Haiti, for example? How do we picture the crushing poverty there, or the political instability that has turned to violence once again? How does that violence affect her family's ability to feed her? Are her parents safe? Where does she live?

What of a family in Central America, with sons about to be teenagers, whose communities are ruled by roving gangs, some of whom wear the uniform of the nation's military? How do they keep their sons safe? What of subsistence farmers in Africa who can no longer grow their crops because of climate change that they did not cause? What of protestors in Hong Kong, now facing prison for trying to claim the freedoms they were guaranteed when Hong Kong became part of China once again? What of Black men in our own country who are followed around in every store they enter, whose homes are appraised at half the value of the same house in a white neighborhood, who are arrested when a white man would not be? How do we do anything about these situations? How do we pray for justice for people whose experience is so far from our own that we have difficulty imagining it? How do we include these people that we do not know in our circle of care?

Today's scripture is about a widow – the very symbol of a powerless person in Israelite culture – who is seeking justice from a corrupt judge – the symbol of a person with great power and arbitrary authority. She has no way to force him to treat her fairly. Nevertheless, she comes to him again and again and again to demand justice. Eventually the judge says 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." Jesus says, we should pray for justice with this same persistence. We should be willing to bother God with our prayers for the justice that we cannot bring about on our own.

Sometimes all we can do to bring about justice is to pray for it. So let us pray deeply, a heart prayer, a soul prayer, for God to bring justice in our world. Let us pray powerfully and persistently. Let us name names and picture faces when we can. And when we can only name the place that needs God's justice, let us trust God to know God's children there. Let our voices be heard on the side of justice for those who are oppressed, for those left behind, for those who never, ever get a fair shake. Let us bother God and bother God again, for justice.

Amen