

Tedious Versus Tenacious Prayers [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 18:1—14

One of my favorite *Far Side* cartoons depicts this floundering swimmer in shark-infested waters; and he's praying for God to save him. Then, as he's watching the dorsal fin of this Great White gets closer and closer, he has an idea. "Dear God," he says, "make this shark a Christian like me, make this shark a Christian, make this shark..." And so, just before the carnivorous fish is about to open its jaws, there's this pause; time stops; the froth of sea freezes; and the shark puts his front fins together and he says, "God, for what I am about to receive, make me truly grateful."

Have you ever prayed a desperate prayer like that? There's really no getting around it. We joke and we tell stories, but people pray for the oddest reasons, during the oddest times, in the oddest ways—and in the oddest places: places like the open ocean, or the fox hole, or the football stadium, where the 'Hail Mary' has morphed into an actual play that's called in the huddle as time runs out. In addition, I've heard at least the word 'Prayer' as it escapes from the lips of some politician at a podium. It typically arises in response to the latest gun violence or mass shooting; and we hear that the victims and the survivors will be "in our thoughts and prayers." And isn't that a twist? In the Reformed Tradition of the Christian Faith, we have PRAYER as the ADORATION of God, as CONFESSION to God, as PETITION for others before God, as INTERCESSION for others, as a request for ILLUMINATION or, as we discussed last week, the embodied expression of THANKSGIVING. But frequently what's offered in the public perception is prayer as an *Avoidance-Mechanism*, as a *Kicking-the-Can-Down-the Road*, as an *Escape Hatch* to get away from responsibility. And I wonder about that.

Biblically-speaking, of course, there's a word used for this perversion of prayer; and it's IDOLATRY. In other words, when you and I orient our daily lives around something that is NOT-GOD—*some image, some idea, some feeling, some system, some formula, some personality*—but we behave as if any of these things were God, we may be mouthing the words and putting on a good show, but we're not really engaging in an authentic conversation.

According to Psalm 115 idol-prayers, or prayers directed towards idols are NOT CONVERSATION:

“they have mouths but do not speak; eyes but do not see; they have ears but do not hear; noses but do not smell; they have hands but do not feel; feet but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. Those who make them are like them; and so are all who trust in them.”

And, you see, the reason I'm mentioning all this stuff about IDOLATRY when I really want to be talking about prayer is that, ironically, we have to start somewhere. And where I propose we start is in the rubble and in the ruins that are left when we've POUNDED AWAY at an idol long enough. Why not start there? Anne and Barry Ulanov claim, in their book, *Primary Speech*, that we shouldn't be surprised if our prayers begin with a “racket”—with a cacophony of other voices crashing into us, demanding our immediate attention. And believe it or not, in today's parable of Jesus I think he's aware of the same dynamic. Jesus is aware, for example, of unjust and indifferent judges. And we have others who judge us. I don't know about you, but for me, the voices that bombard me come from as far back as my childhood; and they are the voices of mean kids, telling me I'm a loser. Is that the God of the Covenant saying that? Of course not. But more often than I'd like to admit, I listen. Or maybe I don't listen. Maybe I distract myself by surfing the internet, by watching T.V., by drinking scotch, by cleaning out my rain gutters...

Or maybe, because the silence seems to track me down, I do eventually try to pray. We all do. We bow our heads and fold our hands; and here come other voices: the voices of alcoholic fathers, scolding mothers, teachers who didn't want us to daydream at school. There's the coach who didn't believe we were good enough to play in the game. There's the ex-lover who told us to go to hell. There's the sexual predator who says, 'Shhh... This is our little secret.' And there's the street preacher, saying 'God hates' this and that. And eventually, we're inclined to give up. Eventually, all of these voices in our heads ossify into stony, immovable fixtures, statues, mental statues... tedious idols. But here comes Jesus with his parable; and in Luke 18:2 he says, ***"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people."***

Let's learn from this and let's be encouraged in that Jesus never suggests that this indifferent authority is supposed to symbolize God's disposition toward prayer. But by beginning there he acknowledges how prayer seems like a banging our heads against a brick wall. And then he leaps, ***"Listen to what the unjust judge says"*** (when he's been worn down to size), ***"And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?"*** In the film, *Shadowlands*, an American divorcee, named Joy Gresham, meets and marries the English fantasy-writer, C.S. Lewis. And, you see, it's Lewis who has created *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in which children travel through an old wardrobe into a magical land with magical creatures and a mysterious lion, named Aslan. But back in real life, Joy has a nine-year-old son and she has cancer. She dies; and Douglas, the boy, is sitting up in the attic of the house, and he's staring at this gigantic, dusty wardrobe that had inspired the author. C.S. Lewis comes into the room to comfort him. And Douglas says, "It doesn't work, does it?"

And his step-father says, “No.”

And Douglas says, “Do you believe in heaven?”

And Lewis says, “Yes.”

And the boy replies, “I don’t believe in heaven.”

And the great Christian writes answers, “That’s okay...”. Now I’d like to suggest that we linger over that remark—because something is being broken down. And what’s being offered isn’t just the static belief in heaven, but a tenacious relationship. Lewis holds and hugs this nine-year-old child, who eventually will embrace his faith in God, but not without the pounding—the pounding even at the one imaginative thing that had given him comfort, that mahogany piece-of-junk wardrobe!

“Grant me justice against my opponent... Grant me justice... Grant me justice...” Luke 18:3

depicts how Jesus understands the enduring practice of prayer. We pound. We wrestle. We say things like, ***“Why have you forsaken me?”*** which is from Psalm 22. And we also wrestle like Jacob in today’s reading from Genesis 32: ***“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”*** And another way of saying what he’s saying here is ‘I WILL NOT SETTLE FOR THE IDOL. I WILL NOT SETTLE FOR A MOCKERY OF PRAYER. AND AT RISK OF BREAKING SOMETHING LIKE A HIP SOCKET, GOD—I WILL NOT RELENT.’

You see the difference? That's not tedious at all. In fact, it's utterly TENACIOUS. AND I think the songwriter, Leonard Cohan, tapped into this mode of prayer with lyrics like this:

“You say I took the Name in vain
I don't even know the Name
But if I did, well really, what's it to ya?
There's a blaze of light in every word
It doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah...”

And so—Praise **YAHWEH!** Praise the Great **I AM WHO I AM!** Praise the Great **I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE!** But, you see, it's the *broken Hallelujah* that works just as well as the *holy Hallelujah*. And if you ask me why so many Hallelujah's are broken, my answer is we've been using them to pound away at the the unjust and indifferent judges of our lives. And so: '*Grant me justice, Grant me justice, Grant me justice...*'

Last January, I went for a walk down Broadway, just beyond the Spokane Courthouse, to this hotdog stand, where I bought a *Seattle Special* with cream cheese and jalapeño peppers. Before I made that order, however, I passed this gray-bearded man in a wheel chair with one leg; and he was holding a megaphone, telling anyone who might listen about the trauma of his treatment at the Veterans Administration. He actually made a litany of his many, horrific health problems, and used words like “corruption” and “injustice.” Anyway—as I was in hurry to eat my lunch—I tried to avoid eye-contact with this strange amputee. That was a Wednesday, about 1 p.m. But guess what happened at 1 a.m. the following Thursday morning?

I couldn't sleep, so I decided to pray; and as I prayed the image of that man, demanding justice for himself and others, came flooding into my head and into my gut. And so, a few hours later, as the sun had risen, I marched back down to the courthouse, where I heard the same voice echoing off the streets and the trees. And as lawyers and litigants, citizens with business in the courthouse, went to and fro, I stopped and introduced myself to a child of God, named *Clay*.

"How ya doing, brother?" he said, putting his megaphone on the sidewalk. And I mostly listened. He said he had a voice, and I agreed. He asked if I were a lawyer; and I told him I was a pastor.

"No offense," he sighed. "But I don't believe in God."

"That's okay," I said. "I just wanted you to know that I hear what you're saying and I'll be praying you get justice."

He said, "Pray for this..." And he pulled up the tattered fabric, concealing the flesh of his amputated stump; he fingered the scars, telling me why he couldn't wear a prosthetic. I asked how long he'd been doing this, coming to the courthouse, and demanding better health care for Vietnam Veterans and all veterans. And he said, "This is basically my life... Do you think God cares? Do you think God cares? Does God care?"