

Fatherly Hearing

Luke 18:1-8a

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(Jesus) started to tell them a story about the need to pray always and to do so in a way that shows that those praying know to whom they are praying. He said: There was a certain judge in a certain city who had no reverence for God or for man. But, there was a widow in that very city who came to (the judge) saying: "Decide a case for me against one who has wronged me". (The judge) didn't want to do anything for a time, but after awhile he said to himself: "Even if I do not fear God nor do I bow to any man, I will decide this case because this widow is a pain in the neck and I do not want, in the end, for her coming to me to give my reputation a black eye." So the Lord said: Hear well what this judge who is characterized by unrighteousness says. Do you think that God only decides the cases of his elect who cry out to Him throughout the day and night, and that he is slow in answering them? I tell you: he decides their case quickly.

What does it take to get you to do something?

My guess is that if it's something that you really want to do, it doesn't take much. If we're headed out on a special day with family and everyone is looking forward to it -- maybe a bit like Thanksgiving for some of you -- then I'm up, out of bed, ready to go, getting everything ready. What about that call to sit down last weekend for a Thanksgiving supper: did it take much to get you to the table?

If, on the other hand, I am dreading the day ahead of me, it might take a loud alarm clock, a good strong coffee (Dutch, preferably!), cold water in the face or a long hot shower, a reminder of why I ever took this job in the first place...

For me, one of the things that constantly motivates me is deadlines. My life is busy but I'm also a bit of a non-closure type of person: I really wouldn't get around to putting the final details on what I do if I didn't have to. Deadlines motivate me to complete research papers that I'm writing, or getting my class notes finalized for the class that starts tomorrow, or getting a sermon ready. After all, the deadline of 10 AM Sunday morning, with lots of eager faces out there, is pretty compelling!

I imagine that deadlines do the same for you, even if it's not preaching: let's just say, for example, that paying your taxes is not the most important thing in the world and that you might not even do it were you to have the choice, but if there is a deadline and if after that deadline you have to pay interest on what you owe, you'll probably be motivated to pay your taxes!

In Jesus' day, there were three main things that what motivated people to do things.

First of all, **what motivated the vast majority of people in Jesus' world was survival.** Every day for many people was a day, not to be thankful for what you have -- as it is in our culture of abundance -- but to fear what was coming next: disease, plague, famine, drought, war. People lived on the edge not as teens often do today -- because they want to -- but because life was like that. The farmers who worked the fields, and the craftsmen who depended on selling their goods to those who had something to spend after a good harvest... were always living in tension, wondering whether things would turn out badly for them, as they usually did, or surprisingly well. Think Sudan. Think Afghanistan.

Some of the most at risk people, people really on the edge, were those who had no visible means of livelihood, people who either couldn't work for a living or who had no one to care for them who could: the grown crippled, those who were diseased but were without family, orphans who had no family, and widows. Women, of course, could not work and depended entirely on their fathers or husbands for their survival. A woman without a father could always rely on her extended family but a widow, who had left her own family, had to rely on her ex-husband's family, and what if they didn't want her? What if there was no one left? What if she were too old to get married again, or had no children? Think Ruth, or better think Naomi.

What motivated the people who did have something was honour. It's a word we don't hear much today. In Jesus' day it meant being esteemed in the market place by your peers or bowed to by those who were inferior to you. Money was evidence of honour, not vice versa: honour was more important. The last thing you wanted to happen if you were "somebody" was for people in the marketplace to make fun of you, to lose face.

Life in Jesus' day looked a lot like it does in the Middle East today. Think Saddam Hussein. The last thing that Hussein wanted was to appear powerless to his people in the marketplace, and to his potential enemies. He succeeded so well in convincing everyone, even intelligence agencies, that he was powerful that his country was invaded under the assumption that he was powerful. Hussein was just the most extreme case: the whole Middle East functions on the basis of show of honour, and of revering men who are just slightly better than you.

Finally, what motivated people, when they were reminded of it by prophets or holy priests, was **the fear of the Lord**, a God whom the people knew not only as creator of the world but as creator of them as a people! They had a sacred covenant with this God and they were to respect it and honour it. Failure to do so, by committing sin against God or by omitting to do what God had required of them, would bring God's own judgment upon them.

But normal daily life went on and sometimes the fear of the Lord was the last thing that people were motivated by. It would only appear on the horizon if prophets or holy priests could clearly

indicate that God was coming for a major performance review of His people. And then just watch the transformation of the plant, the office, the home, the Temple.

In the story that Jesus tells, these three worlds of motivations collide. The world of survival -- in the form of the widow -- and the worlds of honour and fear of the Lord -- in the person of the judge.

What an interesting character this judge is: he bowed to no man and was therefore himself probably bowed **to** whenever he walked through the market place. Why, he even considered himself immune from the wrath of God: "fear God? who me? Ha! What can God do to me? Why, I've never even seen God intervene on anyone's behalf."

But, he is beset by a widow. Like a pestering mosquito, this woman regularly appears before him at his judge's seat, at the city gate, or in the public square, that is, in full public view of the other honourable men of the city. Apparently, this woman has no one to speak publicly for her, no man in her ex-husband's family. And as she appears time after time, the judge puts her off, perhaps hoping for a bribe, or perhaps not wanting to dishonour a fellow man in the city who has wronged this woman.

But, as she appears day after day, and the judge puts her off, the other men in the public square start to murmur: "If he doesn't give her justice, who will? After all, God said to us to care for widows. Maybe God will punish the judge? Isn't the judge being unreasonable against one who can give him nothing." The judge starts to squirm: he is losing face before these other men in not giving this woman justice. And so in the end, the judge gives in, not just because of the widow's mosquito-like pestering, but because of the fear of losing face.

Now, is the point of this story: it is more important to save face in front of the men of the city than to worry about not getting a big enough bribe from this poor widow? Or is it possibly: keep working on people until they are shamed into doing for you what you want them to?

You know I don't think that there is anyone who would say that it's either of these, that that's all that Jesus wanted to say. For Jesus goes on to talk about God, leading to the conclusion that what this story is really about is getting **GOD** to do something. The story, then, appears to be about asking the question that I asked you at the beginning, but asking it of God: **what does it take to get God to do something?**

But, how does one do that? I have a feeling that the way this story from Luke gets used strongly suggests that the way to get God to do something is to behave like the widow, to go day after day to the judge's door until he hears you. In fact, this is the way that this story is often used: the widow is like us, and the judge is like God. So, what we are supposed to do is badger God until He acts on our behalf. If we keep after Him long enough, we will eventually get satisfaction. In this reading, if you and I are persistent enough, we can get God to change His mind, or to heed our request, which he appears disinclined to heed.

My friends, is this what God is like, the God that our Lord made known to us? Of course not: remember: the judge in this story is an unrighteous judge; the only reason that the judge finally acts is because, if he doesn't act, he's afraid of what others will say. This is not what God is like, this is what some **people** are like, people who have power over other peoples' lives. In fact, Jesus says it himself right after the story: Do you think that God is like the unrighteous judge, who only answers when we cry out to him day and night and that it takes Him time to answer? No, God hears and answers quickly. In fact, God is set to answer even before you ask.

I know that many people who read the Bible often feel in their hearts that God is in fact very much like a distant, unfeeling judge. They read this story and say, yes, that's my experience and I'm just beating on God's door until He answers. Or they feel that God is like someone you thought you could trust but who, in the crunch, let you down. Those people might look at a very similar story that Jesus told in Lk 11.5-8: "Imagine that you have a friend and you go to him in the middle of the night and you say to him: "Friend, make available to me three loaves of bread, since a friend of mine has come to me from a journey and I have nothing to set before him." The one to whom he has come answers him from within: "Don't be such a pain in the neck (*same phrase!*). The door is locked and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you (what you are asking)." I tell you: even if he does not get up and give him (what he is asking) because he is his friend, he will get up and give (his friend) as much as he wants made available because he fears that his friend will give his reputation a black eye the next day in the marketplace. And so, Jesus says, I say to you (my disciples) ask ..., seek..., knock..."

People read this who feel that God is not answering their prayer and they say: it's because I have not knocked long enough, because I haven't sought God in the middle of the night, that it's my fault and God has turned His back on me. If only I'd kept at it. Only then will God act.

My friends, let me tell those of you who feel this way or those of you who have felt that way or those of you who know someone who feels this way: your pain is real to God, but you are wrong about what you think about God. The very reason that Jesus is telling these stories is to show you not what God is like but what God is **not** like. What motivates God, what gets God to act, is not that God needs to be humiliated; what motivates God is simply that, as revealed by our Lord, he is our Father. Jesus has told the story in Lk 11.5-8 to help his students, us, to see what motivates God, and what we must do to get God to act. Look above to vs. 2. It's very simple: at the request of the disciples, Jesus is going to teach them how to pray. "When you pray, say simply: "Father..." And let everything that you pray after that follow from that. And I would say: let everything you **do** follow from that.

Father. That's the key. When you pray, pray to God not as you would to a heartless judge or as a socio-economic equal, but to a father.

God does **not** hear us like a judge who is characterized by unrighteousness, someone you have to keep badgering to get an answer from. God is **not** like someone who owes you something but who, when he's snug in his comfortable bed, won't answer. No, God is like a **father** who even before the child cries out rushes to catch the child falling off the bicycle, rushes to catch the child

who was climbing -- but is now falling -- from the tree. Who sees the lost children hiding up in the tree and tells them to come down and come home for a family meal, who even before you can get home to say your words of repentance is already running toward you to put a ring on your finger, sandals on your feet and to prepare a feast for you.

My friends, to say that what motivates God to act on our behalf is that He is our Father does not detract from God's majesty and authority, but it does detract from God's distance. How does a child approach her father? How does your child come to you? Do you think that your child ever comes to you thinking herself your equal? Look into your daughter's eyes: don't you see how much she knows how different you are? But she comes to you, authority that you are, in love, if indeed you love her as God loves you.

Look into your heavenly Father's eyes. You will see nothing but an infinite love and steadfast mercy, desiring you to grow up to be everything that He has made you to be. Do you see the unfeeling eyes of a distant judge? I don't.

But, some might say: "but what about unanswered prayer? God hasn't answered my prayer. Don't I need to keep crying out to Him until he does?" How do you know that your Father, who heard you before you asked, hasn't answered you? If your prayer is for healing, it may very well be that God has already answered and it is just a question of the healing being made manifest. The words of Jesus in Luke 18 are couched in a much larger section on the coming of the Lord and when it will happen. The answer suggests that it **is** happening even as Jesus speaks. After all, do you think that the Lord has not answered the prayers of His faithful people to come for them? Is it not just the revealing of that coming that we are waiting for? I do not live my life wondering whether he will come or when but rather, knowing that He has come, what will the ultimate revealing of His coming look like?

Or, for those of you concerned about unanswered prayer, it is possible that the answer the Father gave was no.

The other night our son Jonathan, who is 16, came to us. He said, I'd like to go to a party at so-and-so's house. I can bus back. It'll be late and if anything goes on that I shouldn't be involved with, I'll just leave early. My wife and I paused and said: We'd rather you not go. He answered: Really? (I think he was surprised because we usually say that it's alright for him to go. But, we were concerned.) So, I reiterated: Yes, I'd ask you not to go. OK, he said. This time it was my turn: Really? I said. Yeah, he said, it's OK, I just wanted to get your permission, but it's OK. He didn't badger, belabour, plead. He accepted the no out of the knowledge that we have loved him all of his life and have, I believe, always made that known to him. A no in that context was no less loving than yes would be in another context and in that context "No" was certainly a more loving fatherly thing to say than "Yes" would have been. Because sometimes a "fatherly no" is the most loving answer.

My friends, nothing I have said here should lead any of you to go out from this place this morning and say that you were told **not** to pray continually. Of course not: we **are** to pray

continually. But we are not to pray as we would before an unrighteous judge, for whom only the threat of dishonour gets him to act, or as we would with someone who owed us something, and who needs to be threatened with humiliation if he doesn't act. No, we are to come to God our Father as you would want your children to come to you. You are to pray continually to God as you as a child or young person would want to come and bring things to your parents regularly, to talk things over with your father, or just to be there with your father or your mother. That's exactly what the Holy Spirit will prompt us to do continually.

It is this simplest prayer to God as Father that we will remember throughout our lives. And it is this prayer that will sustain us when we tread the verge of Jordan. When my father was close to death, there were times that he was incoherent and there were times that it was unclear that he knew what we were saying to him. But, every evening as we left, we would pray with him. He would be quiet. We didn't know if he heard our not. But at the very end of our prayers with him, there came a moment when we would conclude our prayer with him with the Lord's Prayer. And as if transported back to his infancy, as we said the Lord's Prayer, his lips would move, mouthing the same words: "Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name..." A prayer he had repeated to the Father since being at his mother's knee. I have no doubt that the Father heard His child's prayer.

My friends, pray continually, but pray as you should; know who it is that you are praying to: to a Father who hears you and has heard you from before you were born, who loves you and will love you even after this body dies. All it takes to get God to act is to call him Father and then to live that prayer as His child.

And now to the Father, and to His Son, and to the Holy Spirit, be all glory, honour, and power, forever and ever. Amen