

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.

Today's parable is unique to the Gospel of Luke. As with most parables, the language is highly condensed and the meaning is wide open. In fact, in these eight short verses we find theological key words and topics referring to an abundance of complex Christian doctrines: prayer and trust, justice and deliverance, judgement and faith, persistence and resistance, the first and second coming of Christ, and the life of believers.<sup>1</sup>

In short, there is no shortage of sermons to be found in today's reading, and so the challenge this week has been picking just one. You only get one, don't worry! And so the question I kept coming back to was this: **how do we learn to pray always and not to lose heart?**

Jesus frames today's parable as showing us something about the **need** to pray always and not lose heart – but **how** are we to do that?

I mean, I get the **need**. The world was just as topsy turvy for people in Jesus' day as it is for us. The forces at work in their world were also destabilizing (for all that the forces that are at work around us can feel world ending). And so yes, we need to pray just as they did – but **how** do we not lose heart?

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4.

How do we not lose heart when we are bombarded with news every day about the devastation of creation, the terror and destruction of war, abuse of power and mistreatment of the vulnerable?

How do we not lose heart when we watch our neighbors struggle, weighed down by the burdens of debt, or addiction, or impossible choices because of lack of adequate health care?

How do we not lose heart when those we are closest to are hurting and need healing, when our lives fall apart in ways big and small, and prayer feels like something that just gets swallowed up by the void?

Jesus told a parable, and in that parable, he showed us **how**.

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There once was an unjust judge and a persistent widow. The judge had lost heart, and we are told he no longer feared God or had respect for people. The widow, nevertheless, persisted in seeking justice from this judge – pestering him until she wore him down and he granted her petition.

God is the widow – the one longing for and seeking justice, restless in her pursuit.

We, if we lose heart, are the unjust judge – no longer praying to God nor caring for the welfare of others.

But God is the widow – and the widow endures and pesters and never gives up on us. God's generous and unconditional love is written on our hearts, and God is always seeking to kindle our hearts into loving action and compassionate justice.

Here's **how** to not lose heart, if we are to follow God's example: we must choose hope, not fear – love, not hate. We must be persistent and resilient and trust – even (and especially) when it feels impossible to do so.

Prayer is hopeful trusting in God, rather than trusting in ourselves. When we our hope is rooted in God's love, instead of ourselves or the world around us, we don't lose heart.

And when that love feels far away or absent (as happens at times), we must also be like the widow and not give up – doubling down, pouring out our hearts, and praying anyway. Because at its heart, the power of prayer is that it changes us.

Just like any habit we cultivate, the habit and practice of prayer changes our lives. Prayer keeps us from closing off our hearts, teaching us mercy instead of letting us slide into numbness. The regular practice of letting go of our pretense of control when we pray helps us grow in compassion. And regularly offering prayers of thanksgiving cultivates the virtue of gratitude in our lives.

What would the world look like if more of us were merciful, compassionate, and grateful? Would it not change as well? That's how it works: prayer doesn't change God, it changes us, and then we change the things that need changing. It's why God longs so for us to pray always and not lose heart – so much so that God embodies that widow who sticks with us until we get it get to work.

Because yes, we **need** to pray always and not lose heart – it's how God's justice and compassion are brought to bear in our broken world – and, **how** we do this is by persevering with steadfast faith and trusting that all things are possible with God.

So follow God's example and be like the widow. Be bothersome and persistent and single minded – both in prayer and in loving action. And then Jesus returns, he will indeed find faith on earth.

~ Amen ~