

“And Never Lose Heart” / Luke 18:1-8 / 13 October 2013

“Then, Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always...and not lose heart.”

Pray...and not lose heart! When was the last time you prayed? I mean really prayed. I'm not talking about some perfunctory pre-dinner prayer. And bedtime prayers with kids might be genuine and heartfelt, but they don't count either. When was the last time you found yourself beset with longings for something that wasn't, something that ought to be? When was the last time you allowed those longings to possess you, take hold of you, turn your spirit outward, and upward, and inside out...in prayer? Have you prayed recently? Oh, you've prayed, but you may not have noticed.

If ever you want to see Buddhists, and Muslims, and Catholics, and Protestants, Jews, and Hindus all praying together; if you want to witness Sikhs praying with atheists, and agnostics, and Wiccans; if you ever want to see tattooed motorcycle riders with unkempt beards and black leather praying beside retired librarians, proper, dignified ladies with their hair in a bun; if you ever want to see Pirates fans and Cardinals fans praying side by side, the strangest, most reverent act of unplanned corporate worship on earth, soccer moms, and Japanese tourists, and all manner of immigrants and bankers all lost in the wonder and the awe that is prayer, people of every age and every language; if you want to see that, I know of one place on earth where you can go. Just past the visitors' center at the Grand Canyon, there is an overlook where people gather from all the world over. They stand gazing out at that ancient marvel—so old, so vast, so beautiful. Not a one of them is speaking. Each one is lost in awe, pondering their own smallness and fleetingness in the face of these ancient rocks, meditating on the mystery of time, which carves this deep canyon with a trickle of water over patient, unseen eons. Are they not praying? They're lost in the mystery of life, and change, that great mystery of death that envelops us all. Perhaps some of them are even coming to terms with the fact that we are, all of us, surrounded by mystery from cradle to grave, and that mystery will claim us each one in the end. Two truths sneak up on those unlikely worshipers at the edge of the canyon: 1) the knowledge that they are finite, and 2) the knowledge that something else out there is not. In their own varied ways, they are communing in prayer with that Mystery that you and I call “God.” They're praying, all of them, perhaps without knowing it. Praying and snapping pictures. Those general prayers can be deepened by dwelling in them, by making them more intentional, by addressing them specifically to God, the Source of all our best wonder and longing.

We pray, you and I, without even knowing it. The newspaper is more a prayer journal than any devotional book ever written, for who can read it without pausing to wonder at the violence of our world, the injustice, the needless pain? Who can get past page three of the daily paper without falling silent, without sensing a deep, otherworldly longing for things that ought to be, but are not? Are we not praying when we read about a gang rape and murder in India? Are we not praying when we fret about the future of our planet, when the yearning for peace, and fairness, and goodwill could nearly make us choke on the lump in our throats? Oh, it is prayer! We are praying when the movie ends with glorious music, when the good guy gets the girl, saves the world, and manages to make a joke all at once. When the film ends happily, aren't we praying that there might be happy endings, too, in our own lives and in our world? Are we not praying when a stranger's sorrows stop us in our tracks? Are we not directing our emotions and our wordless thoughts toward Whatever or Whoever might be listening? Are we not praying when we sit in stillness, not knowing whom to be, what to say, how to move forward? Were you not praying when the Bucs finally went to the playoffs after twenty long years?

Oh, your prayers might not have seemed all that reverent at the time. It might have been beer on your breath, rather than the sweet grape juice of communion. As you screamed at the umpire, as you jumped up and down in front of the TV, your words and your wishes might not have been addressed to God, *per se*. No, it's more likely that they were messages in bottles, cast adrift on the ocean of the universe. But what does it mean to send our fondest wishes out into the world without mailing addresses? Is it not prayer? You were praying, just as you do pretty much everyday of your life. “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always...and not lose heart.” Praying-always is

easy. Even atheists do it. It's the not-losing-heart that's hard. When it comes to it, maybe not-losing-heart is the difference between an atheist and a person of faith.

You've surely heard this parable of Jesus before, about a persistent widow and a crooked judge who refuses to hear her case, probably because she has nothing to pay him for his troubles. She keeps coming back and hounding him. "I've been wronged! Your Honor, please hear my case, and give me justice against the guy who stole my goat, or sold me a defective loom, or planted his vineyard on my property. Give me justice." Her longing itself is a prayer, her constant coming, her persistence.

In Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Luke, the anti-heroes really have a great degree of self-awareness. Back in chapter 16, you had the dishonest manager who was about to lose his job, so he said to himself, "What am I going to do for a living? I'm too proud to beg and too weak to dig ditches?" And here, in this familiar parable about the wicked judge and the persistent widow, the judge is equally ready to admit his own faults. It's probably meant to be a little comical, the way the judge talks to himself. He doesn't try to hide from his own faults. He says, "It's true that I don't fear God, and I don't respect anyone. But since this widow keeps bothering me, I'll grant her justice." And Jesus uses this story to teach a lesson about how we should persist in prayer...and not lose heart.

There's a lot of confusion about what prayer is. And at first glance, it sounds as if Jesus is saying that prayer is asking-for-things, that it only works if you really make a nuisance of yourself. I don't think that's what he means. A journalist was assigned to the Jerusalem bureau of his newspaper. He got an apartment in the old city, overlooking the Wailing Wall. After several weeks he realized that whenever he looked at the wall he saw an old Jewish man rocking back and forth, praying vigorously. The journalist wondered whether there was a publishable story there. So, he went down to the wall, introduced himself and said, "You come to the wall each day without fail. What are you praying for?" The old man replied, "What am I *not* praying for? In the morning, I pray for world peace; then I pray for understanding and goodwill throughout the human family. I go home, have a cup of tea, and I come back to the wall to pray for an end to greed, and war, and injustice. I ask for a cure to Alzheimer's and cancer. I finish up by praying for my grandchildren and the world they'll inherit." The journalist was moved by the old man's sincerity and persistence. "You mean you come to the wall to pray every day for these things?" The old man nods. "How long have you been doing it?" The old man became pensive and replied. "Oh, maybe twenty, twenty-five years." Amazed, the journalist finally asked, "Surely you wouldn't do this if it didn't make you feel better somehow. I mean, how does it feel to come and pray every day for over 20 years for peace, and healing, and well-being for the world?" "How does it feel?" the old man replied. "Most of the time, it feels like I'm talking to a wall."

It's not actually a very funny story, I know. But its power is in the fact that you and I know exactly how it feels, don't we? When you've sat down to pray, or knelt, or folded your hands and closed your eyes, you've surely very often felt as if you were simply talking to a wall. But prayer is not just asking for things. It's a lot simpler than asking; it's longing. When we treat prayer like asking, when we treat it like some sort of magic trick for Christians, something that will give us what we want if we do it long enough or well enough, then we are doomed to fail at prayer. Gandhi was a lifelong Hindu, but I agree with his theology of prayer, for he said, "Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul." He went on to say, "It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without heart." Prayer is often a cry for justice, for things to be set right. Prayer wells up in all our hearts from time to time; it's the almost animal longing for something that is not, something that—at least in our opinion—ought to be. It's usually about this world and its sorrows, this world and its joys. And when you stop dreaming for a better world than the one that is, when you settle mutely for the world you've got, when you stop longing, and yearning, and hoping, that's called "giving in to despair." That is when your spirit stops praying and becomes cynical. It's exactly what Jesus warns us not to do.

Our task, our calling, is to pray always and not lose heart. The storm raged around a sinking ship, and the captain stood up to ask if anyone aboard knew how to pray. One sailor stepped forward and said, "Aye, sir, I know how to pray." "Good, laddie, I'm glad ye know how to pray," the captain

replied. “Now you get to praying while the rest of us put on these life-preservers. We're one short.” Too often, prayer has been treated like the magic-of-last-resort. And it's gotten a bad reputation for that reason.

Ofttimes our best prayers are the silent longings of the soul, but it's also good when we try to fit those longings into words every now and again. The process of putting our best hopes into words makes us more fully aware of them. Jake was a kid in my confirmation class years ago. His mother had grown up in the Southern Baptist tradition, and she loved the intellectual freedom in our congregation. Her son, Jake, was less enthusiastic about church—ours or any other. Confirmation class had fourteen kids that year, and he completed it faithfully. But he told me in private that he was only doing it to get his mother “off his back.” He said to me once, “I've thought a lot about God, and I believe that God is an imaginary friend for adults.” He went on to explain: People talk to God as if God were standing right there, like an imaginary friend. Won't they all be so disappointed someday when they die and realize that they'd wasted all that time in prayer when no one was listening? My answer for Jake was that—even if God is a figment of our imaginations—prayer is still good, for prayers express the deepest yearnings of a human heart. Prayers reach beyond myself and my small desires; they touch at the very life of the world. The best dreams, the highest ideals, the finest human achievements began as prayers. Besides, each of us has deep, inner thoughts and hidden feelings that we will never really understand, emotions that we will never explore, until we've passed them through the language filter, squeezed them awkwardly into whatever words we find to express them, and then hear ourselves uttering those feelings and thoughts in prayer. If you cannot pray, I told Jake, then I hope at least you'll spend the rest of your life talking to yourself, for you will never really know what is inside of you until you do. Well, Jake didn't buy it, but I still do. There is power in naming the things within our hearts. There is power in putting them out there into the world, hearing ourselves whisper them to the walls. I do believe that our prayers are heard, but even if they were not, they would be worth the praying, for they teach us who we are and how to be in this world. Pray always, with or without words. Pray, and never lose heart.

Something there is inside of us that feels compelled to stand in awe, to stand in mute wonder from time to time, to release those feelings of longing and worship out into the universe around us, and we'll find an object for our sense of awe one way or another. The secular writer David Wong writes about this phenomenon in *Cracked* online magazine. He ends his article saying: “You need something to be in awe of. You, the person reading this. If you don't have something, you'll create it. You'll obsess over a girl or a guy, you'll obsess over money, you'll obsess over World of Warcraft. You will be defined by what you choose to worship, but you will worship something, and your whole life will be a steady parade of various people trying to convince you that they or their product are just the thing to fill that void.” Then he adds, “Buy my book.”

The trick to praying well is to own our longings, perhaps even name them, attach words to them if possible, then direct them back to God, the Source of all our best dreams and yearnings. When was the last time you prayed? Oh, you've prayed, probably within the past day or two. Deep within the quiet of our secret hearts, each of us is longing for things that we believe ought to be, if they are not. We're hoping for an end to a loved-one's illness or addiction. We're dreaming of a place past stress and anxiety. We're yearning for a solution to global warming, and terrorism, and those big global problems that threaten to engulf us. We're looking past ourselves for meaning, and satisfaction, and faith. We're calling out for justice, for old wrongs to be set right and old hurts to be forgiven. We pray without even knowing it. Capture those deep desires of the soul, those unspoken prayers, and be intentional about them; dwell in them. Much of our life is a prayer, even though we often pray for the wrong things, and our prayer is frequently a plea for justice. “Let things be made right,” or, as Jesus put it, “Thy kingdom come.” There's only one wrong way to pray, and that's to make it so hard that it scares us away. And