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Pray Always

When the late composer Leonard Bernstein was composing his famous contemporary *Mass*, he said that he wanted it to be “an honest Mass.” What he meant was that he wanted the words and music of this Mass, this worship service, to ring true even to people who didn't see themselves as particularly religious, or churchy. Because of this, he knew that the most demanding moment in the Mass would not be *Credo*, “I believe.” Most people, he thought, believe, at least vaguely, in God. The most demanding moment would be *Oremus*, “Let us pray,” because to pray, to talk to God, we cannot hedge our bets about God, we have to move beyond vagueness and enter into a relationship with God.ⁱ

Sure enough, in Bernstein's *Mass*, when it comes time to pray, a chorus begins to intone a traditional prayer of confession, but then a lone tenor voice soars up above the others to sing:

If I could, I'd confess
Good and loud, nice and slow
Get this load off my chest
Yes, Lord, but I don't know.
What I say, I don't feel
What I feel, I don't show
What I show isn't real
What is real, Lord?
I don't know.
No, no, no, I don't know.

Leonard Bernstein assumed that contemporary, non-religious people would have problems with prayer.ⁱⁱ

But problems with prayer isn't a recent phenomenon. Jesus told his disciples a parable because they were having problems with prayer. He told them a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.

About twelve years ago, in the *Chicago Tribune*, a story appeared about a plea for prayers. Mark Cruikshank, owner of two transmission shops in Chicago, decided to go public with his prayer requests. For six months, the signs outside his shops, ordinarily devoted to oil change specials, transmission jobs, and foreign car repairs became Cruikshank's giant prayer card, the bold and public plea of a private, scared man. For the drivers and pedestrians who passed by his shops, the signs became as familiar as a song stuck in one sad groove. The signs said, PLEASE PRAY FOR OUR DEBBIE THAT GOD WILL CURE HER CANCER. Cruikshank's 46 year-old wife had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She had discovered the cancer one night while lying on the floor reading magazines with their thirteen year-old daughter. Debbie had flipped over onto her stomach and felt as if she'd fallen on a sharp rock. Within days she had begun her sojourn through the frightening world of doctors and hospitals and chemotherapy. Her blond hair fell out in clumps. Her legs became numb and she couldn't walk. And all her husband could do was watch.

Cruikshank hated his helplessness almost as much as he hated the disease. And so he did the one thing that made him feel useful. He posted the signs outside his shops, astonished at his own ability to broadcast his love and need and faith.

Strangers answered his request in ways he and Debbie never dreamed. They sent rosaries and medals and more than 1,000 cards and letters. They called. They stopped in the shops to check on her condition. Most of all, they prayed.

Cruikshank wondered, "Was [putting up the signs] an act of desperation on my part? Maybe. Lord knows, we felt desperate at times. But to reach out into a cold, cynical, tough, negative world and have the world come back to you and embrace you, it makes you feel good, it really does."ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus said, "Pray always and don't lose heart."

Our church teaches that prayer is the vocation of every Christian. The *Book of Common Prayer* describes prayer as, "our responding to God, by thought and deeds, with or without words."^{iv}

But prayer can be a problem for us, a subject that raises a lot of questions. Prayer has a way of putting our faith on the line: is there a God or not? If there is a God, does God listen? Am I really speaking to God or am I only speaking to myself? Is there a God who cares for us, who hears and responds? What if I pray and I don't get what I want? These are frightening questions. The subject of prayer can be a problem.

Jesus said pray always and don't lose heart.

The problem beneath all of our problems with prayer may be just what Jesus is addressing here. We simply lose heart.

So Jesus tells a story about a woman, a widow, who is persistent. Since she is a widow, in her culture, she has no one to protect her, no one to look after her, no one to defend her. She has been wronged and she wants what is rightfully hers. So she takes her case to a judge. Unfortunately she gets the worst judge in the land. For awhile the judge pays no attention to her, but she keeps coming back again and again, annoying him with her cries of, "Give me justice! Give me justice!" She leaves him messages on his voice mail. She emails him constantly. She tracks him down on the golf course and just as he's teeing off she yells, "Give me justice!" Finally she just wears him down. He says, "This widow is getting on my nerves. I am getting really tired of her hounding me. If only to get rid of her, I'll grant her justice."

And then Jesus tells the point of his story. If that unjust judge will grant justice to that widow, how much more will God, the very author of justice, who loves you, grant justice to those who call out to him day and night?

Jesus is not afraid to use someone we would call a bad example to make a point about our very good God. Jesus uses this way of telling stories that moves from the lesser example to the greater. The story works in this way: if something is true in the lesser case, how much more it is true in the greater case. Jesus uses this same technique when he teaches about prayer at another place in the gospels. He says, "Who among you, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead, or if he asks for bread, will give him a stone? If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11)

Pray always and do not lose heart.

Perhaps the most troubling questions about prayer have to do with how prayer is answered. What if our prayer isn't answered in the way we want? Does that mean we haven't prayed hard enough? That we haven't been able to convince God of our need, our desire, our fears or longings?

The point of Jesus' parable about the persistent widow is not that through her persistence, she got what she wanted. The point of the parable is that God, the author of justice, will surely give justice. God, the origin of compassion, will show compassion; God, the source of love will show love; God, the foundation of faith, will be faithful. We can trust. And if our unceasing prayer is for justice, we will probably find ourselves working for justice. If we are praying for what is in the heart of God, we will find ourselves working for the things God cares about too: justice, mercy, compassion, freedom, hope, peace, dignity for all.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The most important time to pray is when your prayers seem meaningless." What are you going to do? "Take to your bed with a box of Kleenex? . . . No. Day by day by day, you are going to get up, wash your face, and go ask for what you want. You are going to trust the process [of persistent prayer, of staying in relationship with God] regardless of what comes of it, because the process gives you life. The process keeps you engaged with what matters most to you, so you do not lose heart. . . Prayer keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart. It's how we bother God, and it's how God bothers us back. There's nothing that works any better than that."^v

A prayer in our prayerbook comes to mind as showing the trusting aspect of prayer. In a prayer of St. Chrysostom we pray, "Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us."^{vi} It's humbling: it means I give over to God the ability to determine what is best for me, for us, for the person for whom I pray. I may have ideas of what's best. I may be right. I may be wrong. I turn over to God the decision, and trust that God knows better than I, and that God will answer all our prayers in the way that is best for us. It's humbling. It's also hopeful: God is going to give us the best -- not what will do, what will suffice, what will get us off God's back. No: the best. Be persistent. Keep showing up. Don't you want to be around to see how it all turns out?

After six months of prayer, on Christmas Eve Mark Cruikshank drove his car through the sleet and snow in Chicago on an urgent mission. . . He had to change the sign outside his South Stony Avenue transmission shop. That morning a call had come from Debbie's doctor: the tests had come back clear. There was no sign of the cancer. So Cruikshank drove to the shop and climbed up to the sign.

He replaced the old sign with a new set of black letters: PRAISE GOD DEBBIE IS WINNING HER BATTLE WITH CANCER. He'd already done the same at the Belmont Avenue shop, though there the message says flatly: PRAISE GOD DEBBIE'S WON HER BATTLE WITH CANCER. He didn't have the right letters on hand for a more cautious statement.

The Cruikshanks know ovarian cancer has a nasty habit of sneaking back. For now, they give thanks. Cruikshank is thinking of selling the Belmont shop and buying the motor home Debbie has always wanted.^{vii}

Not all cancer is cured. Not all answers make sense to us. But, through prayer, we can find a home in any outcome, trust that there may be reasons beyond reasons, that God will surely answer our prayers in the way that is best for us.

Amen.

ⁱ Tom Long, "Praying without Ceasing," *30 Good Minutes*, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, October 7, 2007. http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/long_5101.htm

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Plea for prayers is answered in many ways," Mary Schmich, *Chicago Tribune*, Wednesday, January 7, 1998, Section 2, page 1.

^{iv} *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 856.

^v Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Cowley Publications, 1999), p. 202.

^{vi} *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 102.

^{vii} Schmich. Schmich also writes beautifully of the end of Debbie Cruikshank's life in "A Losing Fight for Life Teaches Lasting Lessons," *Chicago Tribune*, March 28, 2004.