

### WAITING FOR GOD TO STEP IN

***Let us pray: O Spirit of God, speak to us through these words, so that we may know your will, our hearts may be encouraged, and our fellowship be strengthened. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.***

On Tuesday night, May 18, 1982, Nancy and I sat in the swing on the screened porch of my parents' house in north Atlanta. We read the 23rd Psalm and prayed for my father who was scheduled for cardiac bypass surgery the next morning. We had driven to Atlanta that day from Williamsburg, Virginia, where we were spending our third year of seminary in an internship at the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church. Before we left Williamsburg, many members of that church contacted me and said, "We're praying for your father." One man in particular, who had also had bypass surgery, came to see me in person and said, "I'm praying for your father. I know he'll be fine. He will feel so much better." The members of the Peachtree Presbyterian Church, one of the largest Presbyterian churches in the United States, were also praying for my father. He was a ruling elder and had served as clerk of session. Many people were praying for my father, and had been for several years, since he had suffered his first heart attack in April 1978.

On Wednesday morning, long before the surgery was scheduled to be completed, a nurse came into the waiting room and said the doctor would be out in a minute to talk with us. We were ushered into a conference room and the doctor arrived shortly to tell us my father had died on the operating table. I don't know exactly what my theology of prayer was at that point, but I'm pretty sure it began to change in that hospital conference room. But, it was a long journey, one that I am still making. I don't know that I ever really thought that prayer worked like a vending machine — just put in enough prayers, punch the button, and you get what you want. But I had to sort through my feelings and emotions and disappointment and questions in the wake of my father's unexpected death — especially when so many people said, "We're praying for your father."

Early in 1996, Mildred Stephenson, one of the matriarchs of the Stanley White Presbyterian Church in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She was affectionately known as "Doodie" and was our kids' adopted grandmother. Doodie was one of the most faithful people I have ever met. She lived a couple of streets over from the manse. One afternoon I walked over to visit Doodie who was now bed-ridden. As I was getting ready to leave, I asked Doodie what she wanted me to pray for. She said, "The same thing that I'm asking everyone to pray for — that I be spared the pain I know comes with pancreatic cancer." That was my prayer that day at her bedside and the prayer that many people offered for Doodie in the following days and weeks.

A few weeks later, during the pastoral prayer in worship, I prayed what Doodie had asked — that she be spared the pain that can come along with pancreatic cancer. About 1:30 that afternoon, Doodie's sister, Delsie (also a member of the church) called to tell me and Nancy that Doodie's children had just called from the hospital in Chapel Hill. The doctors had just informed them all that Doodie's most recent scan showed no pancreatic cancer. They could not offer any medical explanation for what had happened. Six days after Easter, on April 13, 1996, we had Doodie's funeral. The cancer had spread to other parts of her body, but she had been spared the pain of pancreatic cancer.

During this past week Cheryl sent emails to the congregation with specific prayer requests for Joel Coleman, Hill Lanier, Andrea Casteen, and Tommy Wright. We've been praying for these folks for a long time, and we will continue to pray for them. We also have quite an extensive Prayer Concerns list printed in the bulletin each Sunday. Some names have been on the list for quite a while. Sometimes a name is removed, because the person has gotten better or because the person has died.

Sometimes the person's name remains on the list, but the reason and the prayer request change. And we keep on praying.

This sermon is not about how “prayer works” — and I even hesitate to use that phrase, “prayer works.” Somehow that suggests that we are in control, if we just say the right kinds of prayers or get enough people praying or pray hard enough or long enough. And, again, it also kind of smacks of “vending machine” praying. Think about how you feel when you put your money into the snack machine, punch the buttons, and watch helplessly as the bag of chips or candy bar gets hung up on the metal bar and doesn't drop down into the chute — or the machine dispenses the wrong item and you get a bag of Fritos when what you really wanted was peanut M&M's. So, what happens when you offer up your prayers and you get something other than what you prayed for — or you don't seem to get anything in response to your prayers and they are left dangling, like a bag of chips that just won't fall?

This is not a sermon about how “prayer works” because that's not what the parable of the widow and the unjust judge is really about. I want to read Jesus' parable according to *The Message*. Sometimes it helps to hear the story in a different way. Here is Eugene Peterson's explanation for writing *The Message*: “While I was teaching a class on Galatians, I began to realize that the adults in my class weren't feeling the vitality and directness that I sensed as I read and studied the New Testament in its original Greek. Writing straight from the original text, I began to attempt to bring into English the rhythms and idioms of the original language. I knew that the early readers of the New Testament were captured and engaged by these writings and I wanted my congregation to be impacted in the same way. I hoped to bring the New Testament to life for two different types of people: those who hadn't read the Bible because it seemed too distant and irrelevant and those who had read the Bible so much that it had become ‘old hat.’”<sup>1</sup>

Before we hear *The Message* version of the parable, it might help to know a bit more about judges and widows in Jesus' day. Judicial cases would be heard in the city gate, in a very public setting. Judges held positions of power and authority as they applied God's Word and law to everyday situations for God's people. Widows, on the other hand, were vulnerable and worthy of being given justice. So, the stage is set for the story . . .

*“Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. He said, “There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: ‘My rights are being violated. Protect me!’*

*“He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, ‘I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.’”*

*Then the Master said, “Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?”*

It's tempting to hear the parable and conclude the following:

\* God is the judge in charge.

\* We are the persistent widow bringing our case for justice.

But, what's wrong with that picture?

\* If God is the judge in the story, that means God doesn't respect us and is really a hard-hearted judge who would rather not be bothered with our pleas and prayers, no matter how legitimate they may be.

\* If we are the widow in the story, that means we have to wear God down with our insistent praying and nagging for what we want, until he finally gives in and gives us what we want, just to get us off his back.

Does that sound like the God we worship and serve and pray to? To be honest, sometimes it might feel like we have to badger God to get what we want — but maybe that's exactly why it feels so

hopeless and pointless sometimes. We badger God - we try to wear him down or wait him out or beat him “black and blue” to get what we want, and then are disappointed when the answer is different from what we wanted, or the answer doesn’t seem to come at all.

Ah, but here we are back talking about how “prayer works.” Let’s see if we can’t take a step back and get an even bigger picture of what’s at work here. Jesus was a great storyteller, that’s for sure. As he did many times, Jesus used a tried and true Hebrew storytelling technique in this parable about the widow and the unjust judge. Jesus didn’t say “God is like the judge.” He didn’t really even say “And you are like the widow.” Instead, he used what is called “the lesser to the greater” method of story-telling.

Think about it, Jesus says. If even a scoundrel of a judge — who couldn’t care less what God or other people think about him — is finally willing to cave in and grant the widow’s plea just to get her off his back and save his reputation, just imagine how much more God — who is nothing at all like the scoundrel judge — is ready, willing, and able to hear our prayers and grant justice.

Last year I preached at the community Thanksgiving service at First Baptist Church. My sermon was called “Give Thanks Anyway” and was based on today’s epistle lesson, Philippians 4:4-7, especially v. 6: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

I also referenced Martina McBride’s song, “Anyway.” The chorus says, “God is great, but sometimes life ain’t good. And when I pray, it doesn’t always turn out like I think it should. But I do it anyway, I do it anyway.”

That’s the message of the parable of the persistent widow and Paul’s advice to the Philippian Christians — “pray always and don’t lose heart; in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

At the end of the parable, Jesus asks a piercing question: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” There is the core of the issue for God’s people. We can debate the mechanics of how “prayer works,” but the bottom line is “Do we trust the One to whom we offer our prayers?” If so, then let us keep on making our requests known to God. After all, if even a scoundrel judge who doesn’t care about God or people can finally give in to the widow’s insistent pleas, just imagine how much more God — who has given us all things in his Son Jesus Christ — has our best interests at heart?

As you know, for years I have included the tagline on my emails: “Ask yourself this question: Where is God already at work in this situation?” While we’re praying and waiting for God to step in, maybe we can look around and notice how God has already stepped in, especially in Jesus Christ our Lord.

***Let us pray: O God, help us rejoice in you always, show gentleness to all, not be anxious, make our needs known to you by prayer, with thanksgiving; and may your peace guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.***

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>[www.biblegateway.com/versions/Message-MSG-Bible/](http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Message-MSG-Bible/)