

Bothering God?

How many times have we taken a kid or grandchild to the store and found that the child persistently begs for something that catches their eye. If it's something small we might give in just to keep the child quiet and to keep from making a scene in a public place. But I have seen times when a parent refuses if it's something big or expensive and the ensuing explosion rocks the store with loud wails and outcry of defiance, followed by screaming, crying, whining, and begging much to the embarrassment of the frazzled parent. One such episode happened with my then 4 year old son. He spied a toy that he really wanted and started with the begging, "please mommy". But when I persistently said "no", his prostrations escalated to full battle mode. When he got to crying and screaming stage, I had enough. Leaving my cart in a safe, out of the way place, I took my child by the hand and escorted him out the door to my car. Of course he went kicking and screaming, and I wordlessly steered him to the car, opened the door, put him inside and told him at that point that we would not go anywhere until he settled down. Of course he kept testing my resolve especially when someone passed by. Finally he realized that I was not going to give in and began to settle down. When I thought he was ready, I opened the door, asked him if he was ready to return to the store without crying and whimpering and begging, or would he rather go home and spend time in his room without access to the things he loved to play with. Well the decision was pretty simple and when he did settle down and comply with behaving in the store, we had a good time shopping, I got all the things I wanted and he got blessing of mom's good nature and lots of reinforcement for his much improved behavior. That was the last time he misbehaved in any store. He had learned something valuable about expectations and crossing the boundaries of mom's patience.

Now we come to the story of the widow and the judge. We are not told the circumstances about why the widow needed the judge to judge justly, but we do know that she would not give up. She did not scream and fuss, but simply kept asking for justice in her situation. The judge we know is not one who cares about God or people. He does not have a sense of justice in him, yet, because he is constantly being bothered by the woman, he grants her request. He doesn't really want justice, just for the woman to go away. Just like the way I wanted to get my son out of the situation, so the judge wanted to get rid of the woman. If the unjust judge can finally give in, how much more so will God, who is just, grant a just request.

This parable is not necessarily about persistent prayer alone, but about the persistent prayers of justice. What does the persistence of just prayer do? But first let's look at what just prayer is. We all pray about many things and often it seems that some of our more trivial prayers go unanswered. But just prayer is something different. Just prayer can be anything from the unfairnesses we see in how certain groups of people are treated, or how a grave wrong has been done to our neighbor. We talk about an unfair world, where good people are sometimes

taken advantage of, where innocent children are abused, where whole groups of people are killed in someone else's quest for power. We see situations where peace is illusive. How many times have we sung a prayer for peace at the end of the worship service, and yet non-peaceful behavior persists. Lately we might pray for the lessening of violence, yet seem to be seeing more violence. Ours prayers seem to be going unanswered. So we give up on our prayers for unjust situations to be resolved.

But Jesus tells us to persist, to not give up, to keep praying prayers for justice. Why? God doesn't seem to be answering them. But there is something about persistence that changes us. When we pray for the same thing over and over again, eventually the prayer itself changes. Or our attitude changes or we become more ready to hear the answer God wants us to hear. Perhaps persistent prayer is more about readying us for helping provide the answer in our daily lives. If we are praying for the poor, might we not receive an idea about how to take care of some of the poor in our own lives? And if we are praying for the people of the middle east, perhaps the prayer changes as we focus more on what is really going on. Perhaps our own attitudes about power and violence and self-centered actions change. Sometimes prayer is more about changing us rather than changing the big picture. We might stand a chance of becoming more tolerant toward certain peoples. If we are continually praying for the same thing, something changes us and in changing us, God can work with us to bring about more just reactions toward our neighbors.

When my mother was sick, I prayed for days for her to get better. We had just mended a somewhat broken relationship and I wanted to get to know this person I did not know existed. When she didn't get better and continued to decline in spite of my prayers to the contrary, I began to notice and change in my own attitude. I had been wanting my mother to get better for my own reasons. It was when I realized that my mother needed prayers for strength to face her inevitable journey that the prayers began to change. I learned to pray that God be with her and hold her and invite her into his Presence. I began to pray that her pain be contained, that she learn that she was not alone, and a whole host of other things that one faces when death nears. And I think that God offered all those things because they were what *she* needed most. And I became more ready to accept the journey my mother needed to make. It was enough that we had reconciled and had a few years to "make amends".

Jesus calls us to keep praying, to be persistent in our prayers for justice especially. Persistent prayer keeps working within us until we come to God's answer for us. If we pray for the middle east, it could happen that we begin to sense that peace really does begin with us, that what we do can have a peace impact on the environment around us. It's up to God to answer the bigger prayers in the way that He sees best. But it is up to us to keep praying until we see the need for change to happen within each of us, change that will begin to erase boundaries of hatred and

prejudice. Love and peace blossoms most in our own backyards when the power of prayer makes change within us.

Keep praying for world peace and justice and equality and compassion and end to violence. Keep praying for children and women and the victims of abuse and the powerless. Pray again and again and again for the same things. For it is in those prayers that we are likely to find ourselves and to find God's compassion and sense of justice as we ourselves are changed.