

A man was walking along the top of a cliff, taking in the sights. Suddenly he tripped and fell over the edge. On his way down, however, he managed to grab onto a root jutting out. Now he is dangling precariously on the side of the cliff, hanging on for dear life. He doesn't see that there is a trail that passes just a few feet below him. He cries out, "God! Please help me!" He hears a voice from above say, "Just let go of the root. You'll be okay." The man is quiet for a moment and then calls out, "Is there anyone else up there?"

At face value, today's Gospel sounds a bit like this story. We have a widow who has not gotten the justice she seeks from a cold-hearted judge who cares only for himself. She relentlessly keeps after him until she gets what she wants. There seems to be an implication that God will give us what we want if we just keep after him. Kind of like a giant, cosmic slot machine. Just keep spinning those prayer reels and eventually you'll hit the jackpot.

But of course, there's much more going on in this Gospel. At the time when it was written, people were getting restless because they had expected to already be freed from the injustices of Roman rule and they were struggling with doubt and faith and thinking that God had turned a deaf ear to them. The parable encouraged them not to give up faith and to remain steadfast in their praying. It also taught them about the sometimes surprising nature of prayer. Fast forward 2,000 years and we still wrestle with doubt and faith and wondering if God is even listening to us.

In confirmation, before we talk about the Lord's Prayer, we spend a few class sessions talking about prayer in general. I always ask, "What is prayer?" Unfailingly the answer I get is, "It's asking God for something." That seems to be the common image of prayer. Our entire cultural view of prayer has shifted. It doesn't hold the same place or prominence as it did in our parents' or grandparents' day. Prayer is now often seen as

a formality or a ritual to get through or a list, what I call “head prayers” instead of “heart prayers”. In just a few short years, my confirmation students have gone from, “I pray every night before bed” to “I only pray in church” or “I only pray if I need something.” Yes, supplication is an aspect of prayer, but prayer is so much more than that. Prayer is a deeply personal and intimate communion between you and God. It is at the core of our connection with the sacred.

Think about your closest friend. How did that friendship develop? Probably through talking and listening to each other, along with trusting and caring. And maybe sharing some crazy adventures together. It is the same way with God – even the crazy adventure part. Prayer is the avenue that takes us into that relationship with God and it is the most important aspect of our spiritual lives. It is not just asking but being still and listening and being open to the possibilities God puts before us. Praying, in turn, gives us bigger hearts and makes us better people.

But there are a growing number of Christians who don't really pray. Maybe some of them truly have lost faith. But people give a lot of other reasons for not praying: they're too busy or they feel like they don't know how to pray the “right way” or that their motives aren't pure enough or they feel too angry or hurt. But here's the incredible, beautiful thing: God welcomes us to him just as we are. He takes us in all of our human messiness and imperfections. He can handle the brutal honesty of our frustration and anger and disappointment because God is bigger than all of that. He invites us to share our deepest hurts, sorrows, and joys. He listens with love and without judgment. For anyone struggling with prayer, I would encourage you to try a different way of praying. There are many different ways and not all of them use words. Prayer is that important.

For those who feel God has turned a deaf ear: I don't know why God seems to answer some prayers and not others, but I do know that God tends to answer prayers in ways that we, with our limited perception, aren't expecting or looking for or necessarily even want. Sometimes we already have the answer to our prayers. If we ask God to feed the hungry but we have more than enough food for ourselves, we are the answer to our own prayer.

And that brings me to another dimension of today's parable. The widow is the embodiment of discipleship. Her actions characterize what Christians are called to do. Christianity is not a spectator sport. Christians, as individuals and communities, are to demand justice from those who have the power to grant it. We are called to advocate for the well-being of our neighbors and for all those to whom justice is denied. Martin Luther himself helped get the first social welfare ordinance passed in Wittenberg, which aided the poor, the orphans, and the widows – the most vulnerable in society. As disciples, we are called to fight against the many injustices of this world. We fight the injustice of people being killed because of the color of their skin or the uniform they wear or who they love or just because they are different. We fight the injustice of children who go to bed hungry or who are sold into prostitution or who are bombed by their own governments. We fight the injustice of homelessness and abuse of all kinds and the destruction of the environment. Today's Gospel encourages us not to lose heart and to persist in seeking justice. This is especially important in light of the upcoming election. There is no place in the church for gloating or despair the day after. As Christians, we are called to a higher purpose that transcends politics. Regardless of who gets in the White House, our role as advocates for the least among us in this world continues. "Your kingdom come, your will be done."

May your whole life be a prayer. Amen.