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Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Praying to a Merciful God”  
Text: Luke 18:1-8; Genesis 32:22-30

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The parable Jesus tells today is a pretty simple one to understand. They're not all like that. Some are quite challenging. But not this one. At least, on the surface. There's a corrupt judge. He doesn't care what God thinks about him and the job he's doing. He doesn't care what men think about him and the job he's doing. He cares only about himself. What's in it for him. He is 100% in it for himself. He is selfish to the core.

But one day a widow shows up. She can't do anything for him, so he ignores her, sends her away. But she won't go away. He closes the door but she yells through the door. He kicks her out but she yells in the window. She's there when he's trying to eat breakfast. She's there when he's dining with his friends. She's there when he's trying to sleep. She won't let him go until he blesses her. This widow's taking the definition of pest to a whole new level! Just to get him to do his job.

So finally he relents. Just so he can eat and sleep in peace! Just to shut her up and give his ears a rest. The widow wins.

It's a story to cheer, right? We like to root for the underdog. For the team that can't possibly win to win. For the little guy to knock off the big corporation. For the tortoise to beat the hare. We like that.

But then Jesus turns the parable around . . . in getting to its meaning and why He told it. And here's how it would go if He retold the whole thing in that way:

In a certain city there was a judge who loved God and was devoted to the people. Nobody better. Nobody more fair. Nobody a better judge than he. And there was a widow in town who had been wronged, taken advantage of, and robbed of the little she had. The judge saw the injustice, saw the need, and burned with anger and wanted to do something about it. But the widow never came to him. The widow never asked. Instead, she tried to take care of it herself. The judge was able to help, had the means at his disposal to right this wrong, all she had to do was ask . . .

Which judge, do you think, is your heavenly Father more like?

Luke started by telling us that Jesus told this parable so we would always pray, so we would always ask, and not lost heart. Because we have a God, a Father, who wants to give, who wants to help, who is 100% invested not in Himself, but in us. But do we ask?

This parable is often called *The Parable of the Persistent Widow*, which puts the emphasis on the widow and her persistence. And maybe we need to learn that. *Sometimes* we are persistent. Children can be persistent, nagging their parents, keep asking their parents 'til they get what they want. People are persistent in playing the lottery, even though the odds of winning are longer than the widow in the parable getting the judge to give her justice! And yet year after year they keep buying tickets, hoping this will be the year!

But really, that's not what this parable is about, teaching us to be persistent, even if we need to, even if we're lacking in that. **This parable is really to teach us about God.** That He is not like that first judge. That He is not only *able* to help but *wants* to help. So ask. Pray. Don't lose heart. Because of who He is. Because you have a God who is not just God but your heavenly Father. Not just powerful but powerful *for you*. Because you have a God who is just, and while maybe not always doing what we ask, will always do what is right and best. What will help us not only in the short term but in the long run. What will help us not only physically, in this world and life, but spiritually, that we might have eternal life. Like He did with Jacob - hurting him now to save him forever.

Which we really and truly know, what God is like, because of the one telling this parable. Because before we even knew to ask, God came to us to help and save. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, and all they knew to do was hide because surely God was going to come and swiftly give them judgment for their sin . . . We'll, God did come, and it was swift, and He did pronounce judgment, *but ultimately on Himself*. He had done nothing wrong. He had given only what was good. Yet He would take the sin of His children upon Himself. He would take the punishment. His heel would be bruised in order to bruise the serpent's head. Adam and Eve had made themselves widows, cut themselves off from God, but God came to them, because that's the kind of God He is.

And that promise He made them, to do that, that promise passed down to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was now being fulfilled in the one telling this parable, in Jesus. For very soon now, not long after Jesus told this parable, He would be up on the cross because of unjust judges who cared only for themselves. Because of Jewish leaders and worldly rulers who cared only about their power and positions and enriching themselves.

**That's the kind of God do you have!** Who didn't just have a hip put out of joint, but who was crushed under the weight of our sins and died that you might live. Because He wants only good for you. To give you blessings in this world and life, yes, but who also

loves you enough not to - because your *spiritual* life and well-being are more important. So He comes poor and lowly to us who are poor and lowly. He is rejected and suffers for us who the world also has no use for, who the world thinks dangerous because of the truth we proclaim. And He dies and rises to life again for you, that you might die and rise to eternal life in Him.

Why wouldn't we ask, pray, to such a God?

Well, there are many reasons, I'm sure. Not the least of which is that satan has blinded us and convinced us that's not the kind of God we have. We Christians should know better! Yet how are your prayers? How persistent? How consistent? How often forgotten? Or put off because we think we have more important things to do? And then we never get to them . . .

So part of our confession at the beginning of the Divine Service is for this - that I have not prayed as I should, that perhaps I have thought wrongly of God. And then *God Himself* forgives you for that! Not just the pastor - those are God's words to you: *I forgive you all your sins. That's the kind of God you have.*

But there's another blessing, too, to think about here. That your God who forgives you has also baptized you. Which you know, but maybe don't think about **big** enough. Because when you are baptized and made a child of your heavenly Father, that also means you gain a family. Brothers and sisters in Christ. You are baptized into a church, into a community, into a communion. Which means not only do you pray - **you have people praying for you**. That when your prayers falter, when your prayers fail, when you run out of time, you have others praying for you. And not just here, in this congregation, but all around the world! Christians in Africa, in Asia, in Central America, South America, in Europe, praying for the church in America. Praying for you. Maybe not by name, but your Father hears, and knows.

Which means the widow in the parable, asking at all times, never giving up, so persistent, so consistent, is not you or me, **but the Church**. The Church in all the world.

Which is the really cool thing about the earth's rotation and the sun rising and setting at all different times around the world - there are always Christians getting up and praying in the morning, there are always Christians going to bed and praying in the evening, there are always prayers ascending to God, and, like the widow, giving Him no rest or peace. Always drumming our needs into His ears. But unlike the judge in the parable, He loves it! The constant prayers music to His ears.

And as part of this church, you also get to pray for them. And for people who can't pray, who do not know what God is really like, who aren't children of God who can come to their loving Father. You pray for them. And they need us to do so.

So we do. Here. Together.

And think about our prayers, here, together . . . Did you ever pay attention to the words of the Kyrie that we sing? We pray for peace and salvation and help not just for us or for the church, but for the whole world. When we pray the long prayer of the church, we are praying for all kinds of people in all kinds of needs. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we don't pray: MY Father, give ME MY daily bread, and forgive ME, and lead ME not into temptation and deliver ME from evil - it's all US and OUR. And when we come to the Lord's Supper at the Lord's Table, we pray and sing *with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven* - which is not just people who have died, but all Christians everywhere, gathering around different altars but all of us around the same Body and Blood of the same Lord. The Lord who is gracious and merciful and here for us. For us who need - and have - His help.

So *when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?* He will. But not because of us and our persistence, but because of Him and His love. His mercy and love that will keep and sustain His Bride, the Church, until He comes again. He promised.

But until that day, it is for us, the Church, to pray. To ***pray and not lose heart***. To *Entrust Our Days and Burdens to God's Most Loving Hand* (LSB #754). Because we have a God who is not an unjust judge that we have to wear down, but a merciful Saviour and a loving Father, who loves the prayers of His children, and always wanting and doing the best *for you*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.