

Pray for One Thing – Luke 18:1-8

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Several years ago, author and pastor Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about her experience visiting a Benedictine monastery in California.

“It was a gorgeous place,” she wrote, “with a courtyard garden full of fragrant orange trees and a retreat house full of antiques. When I first came through the door, one of the brothers glided up to me and said, 'I know what you're thinking: 'If this is poverty, I can't wait to see chastity!'"

“Four times a day, a bell rang in the courtyard. As soon as it did, the brothers stopped to pray. The rest of us were welcome to join them, but it was not required. If we did not show up, then they would pray for us, as they prayed for everyone else in the world - for those who were present along with those who were absent, for those who were inclined toward God along with those who were not, for those who were in great need of prayer along with those who were not aware they needed anything at all.

“Prayer was their job, and they took it seriously. They prayed like men who were shoveling coal into the basement furnace of some great edifice. They did not seem to care whether anyone upstairs knew who they were or what they were doing. Their job was to keep the fire going so that people stayed warm, and they poured all their energy into doing just that.”

In hearing this, are you intimidated by the prayer life of the Benedictine brothers? I am. In fact, I’m intimidated by the whole concept of monastery living.

Every once in a while, I hear of pastors who go off to a monastery for a few days to pray and simply live in silence. And I’d never be able to do it. I’d be looking for the cable TV at some point. (There’s gotta be a ballgame on somewhere.) Or a place to charge my

phone. (Excuse me, but what's the WiFi password?) It's too much stillness and silence. Too much prayer. And I feel so inadequate.

Do you find yourself feeling inadequate when it comes to prayer? Does the simple concept of prayer intimidate you? Does its form give you pause? Does the one on the other end of the conversation strike you as too big or too holy to approach? Do you question or doubt the outcome of your prayer?

Such are the fears we have as we attempt to engage in prayer. It comes too infrequently and often too late in our lives, if it occurs at all. And the reasons for that are numerous.

Yet, Jesus prayed. And if for no other reason than that, we should model what he did and pray, too. Maybe that's the simple reason why the Benedictines pray as they do—because Jesus prayed.

In the parable of the unjust judge, we are introduced to a type of person who models for us the persona we should take when it comes to prayer. She was relentless in asking the judge for justice against the opponent she was facing. And because she was so persistent, the judge who was getting annoyed with her constant nagging, grants her request.

Jesus wasn't comparing the unjust judge to God. Quite the contrary, Jesus said, "If even the most unjust of judges will finally relent to the ceaseless petitions of a defenseless widow, then how much more will God—who is, after all, a good judge—answer your prayers."

The God we pray to is one who is eager to hear, who is eager to act in response to our prayers, who is eager to grant the justice we seek for ourselves and the world—no matter how faithful to prayer we've been in the past.

The woman in the parable demonstrates great persistence, much like the brothers Barbara Brown Taylor witnessed at the monastery. From where did the widow's persistence come?

The answer to this question could very well unlock for us a better prayer life.

First, let's consider the identity of this woman who persistently sought justice from the judge. She was a widow. Widows were perceived by many to be a disgrace. Having no inheritance rights and often in want of life's necessities, they were exposed to harsh treatment and exploitation. Yet, Jesus lifts them up as heroes almost.

We have a number of widows in our church family, and I find them to be heroes, too. In the aftermath of losing their husbands, they demonstrate great resolve and strength to continue living and being faithful—even as they adjust to a new life of living alone that they hadn't experienced in decades.

Luke mentions several widows in the ministry of Jesus. From those references, we might certainly characterize them as among the vulnerable, the ones in whom Jesus takes a particular interest, including the widow of our current parable, who is persistent, active, and forceful enough to get the justice she demands even from an utterly unjust judge, and who finally is, by implication, included among the chosen ones of God.

The widow in our story, despite her hardships and cultural status, had an issue to take up with the judge and she was not going to be stopped from making her plea.

So often, when we feel the need to turn to God in prayer, our own issues serve as roadblocks—roadblocks that keep us from praying. Maybe we haven't been cast out like this poor widow was in her culture, but we have our own insecurities: we don't feel we've been faithful enough, or we feel broken or insecure with our status in the church or within our family or throughout our community.

But the widow's issues didn't keep her from being persistent in seeking justice. And our issues shouldn't serve as barriers to our reaching out to God in some sort of prayer life.

The second aspect of this story that is remarkable is the reason behind the widow's persistence. She wasn't persistent in showering the judge with praise. She wasn't persistent in serving the judge in some way.

She was persistent about seeking justice. Something was not right—in this case, she had some type of adversary whom she wanted to acquit herself against. And she wasn't going to take no for an answer. Maybe there were other issues in her life, but this one really got her going. It was her passion to seek justice for herself and she unceasingly worked to get it.

When it comes to prayer, there may be some aspects of it for which we just can't find the excitement. And on any given day, if we sense no desire to praise God for the beauty of the day (when it's raining and the wind is blowing hard) or if we just can't muster up the courage to confess what we've done wrong and ask for forgiveness (even though we have a laundry list of issues we could disclose), we should go with our passion like the widow did. We should find the one thing that is burning on minds and in our hearts and fervently lift it up to God.

With the same persistence of the widow who zeroed in on justice, we can persist in praying about the one issue of the day that has captured our attention.

For example, maybe we can't get out of our minds the people of Ukraine; and so we pray that God would stop the killing there. Or we can't stop thinking about the neighbor across the street who just got diagnosed with cancer. And so he is the focus of our prayer. Or one of our kids can't seem to find her way and is venturing into a scary place. So we pray for her. Or we're consumed with the boss we have at work who makes us so mad seemingly every day. And we simply pray for him. Or we can't get around the fact that we feel listless and disobedient, so we pray that God would grant us greater focus and compassion.

We can pray just that one thing and realize that God would be pleased to hear just that one petition on that day. And in doing so, we would slowly turn our lives to God and place greater trust in the God who is eager to listen and do something about it.

For the monastic, hanging out with God is a way of life. For the rest of us, busy with kids and bosses, spouses and parents, God is

content with a brief date - he asks only that it be a serious one. St. Benedict expressed that in his Rule when he wrote: "Give yourself frequently to prayer," but added, "Prayer should therefore be short and pure"

A child in the book, *Kids Say the Greatest Things about God*, said this about God: You can always reach him at dinnertime.

That's true. It's when we most often try to connect with our creator. And yet, we know that we can reach God all the time, especially with the persistence shown by this widow in Luke. She was the squeaky wheel. And the judge oiled that wheel by granting her what she wanted.

With a little persistence and by picking out just those matters that are on our hearts or minds, we can, despite our inadequacies, more easily connect with our Lord Jesus who so wishes to connect with us.

Like the Benedictine monks, as if they were relentless shoveling coal down in the furnace room to keep the heat going, we can be relentless in just one item of prayer and trust that it will bring us closer to the one who's listening.