

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
The Rev. John Sampson
“Pray Always”



“Serena” by Richmond Barthe

Luke 18:1 – 8
October 19, 2025

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

I had a professor in seminary, James Cole, and he said something to me once which I will never forget and I may have shared this with you before. He said, "You have the facts of your life and you have the revelation of scripture. And when those two things don't connect, when those two things seem to be out of sync with each other, that's when theology is born."

We hear this passage today and it makes me think of the ways in which sometimes our experience of life may not be exactly in sync with what the scriptures tell us. Today we have this message from Jesus in which he's talking about prayer, the efficacy of prayer. He tells us a parable first about a woman, someone we don't know that much about, but maybe she isn't the most powerful woman. Maybe she's not the richest woman. She has to keep going to a certain judge over and over and over again just so that she will finally get the justice she deserves. And we find out behind the scenes that the only reason she gets her justice is because the judge is fed up with her. And then Jesus says, "Oh, but lest you think that that's how God is, that's not how God is".

And yet sometimes in our prayer life it may seem like God is distant. Now many of us do have an experience of prayer in which we pray and the things that we pray about come to pass. I'll never forget a story someone once told me. A friend of mine was in college, no money. He gets a job, but he's got no car to get to that new job. And so, he begins to pray. And a couple of days later, he goes to a local town event and they're raffling off a car and he buys a raffle and guess what? He wins the car. He said to me after that, that he never ever questions the power of prayer. And some of us may have had those types of experiences too where we are praying over something and lo and behold, it comes to pass.

And we might also have a different kind of experience with prayer in which we pray deeply and profoundly for something and it doesn't just happen. Perhaps we have to wait for a very long time for the thing we pray for to come to pass. Perhaps the thing that we pray for doesn't come exactly as we pray for. Perhaps the thing we pray for never arrives.

Here we have in our own experience a disconnect with the words that Jesus shares with us this morning. What does he say? He says, "Will he delay long in helping them?" For some of us, we know that yes, God will actually delay long, very long, and the things we pray for may never show up.

The other thing I think is interesting about this passage is that it's all about justice. We don't know what the specific thing that the widow is asking for, but she, it is said, is asking for justice. And there's the image of her going to see the judge. And I wonder about the ways in which we pray for justice. You may know those words from Theodore Parker made more famous by Martin Luther King Jr. that the moral arc of the universe is long and ultimately it bends towards justice. King knew firsthand the long struggle of the moral arc of the universe from his own community, the African American community first established here predominantly in slavery and the hundreds of years it took to free African Americans and the many many more years it took to achieve equality. And for many of us, we would say that road has not yet come to an end.

Think of all of the people who have been praying for justice for centuries in this country. And we still experience inequality. Scripture tells us that God will not delay. And yet, do we not feel the longest generational delay in the coming of true equality and true justice for all of us, for all of us who call ourselves citizens of these United States of America.

I wonder about that statement elsewhere in the Christian scriptures where it says that a thousand years is like a day to God. Now, if you are an eternal being, of course, a thousand years is probably like 1 second. Maybe a billion years is like a day. But I also wonder if our spiritual ancestors began to believe it because they knew that God's justice, God's answer to prayers, sometimes seems to us delayed. Perhaps they tried to have it both ways. They tried to say on the one hand, yes, we recognize that justice can be delayed. Our prayers may lag in being answered. Perhaps they don't get answered until 15 generations from us. And yet, God also acts quickly because a thousand years is like a day.

For those of us who live in this space between what our sacred scriptures tell us and the truth of our lives, the place where we do theology, where we think about who and what God is and how this thing we call the Holy One actually acts and moves in our world and in our lives.

Perhaps in this space, the greatest effort is never to give up hope. It is to continue to pray, to continue to approach God and open our hearts and our minds to the Divine One, exposing all of our deepest desires, the dreams we carry within us. Hoping and being thankful for the times and the places and the ways in which our prayers are answered and also knowing that great mystery of mysteries which is that God's time is not exactly our time and because of that we should not lose hope.

Imagine if all of the people who had struggled for justice and equality in this nation had given up after 10 years because they said God had not arrived. We've been praying. Where are you God? We've been praying. Why haven't you granted us the justice that we dream of that you had promised all of your children?

Perhaps their prayer was a prayer forward. A prayer not realized in their lives, but a prayer realized in the lives of their great-great-great-great-great grandchildren. A hope that was given as a gift to the future.

I saw on Facebook yesterday, that many of us were at the No Kings protests. I think for many of us here, we are asking for justice. We are praying for justice. And what do you know this morning? It didn't just show up. Things aren't completely different. I opened up the New York Times this morning. It didn't say in a big headline, "New World for the US."

And I say don't give up hope. Don't stop praying. Even if it means that we will not see the justice we are praying for today, or tomorrow, or in our lifetimes. Let us never give up hope that it will be our children and our grandchildren who will be the receivers of the great gift of justice that we dream of and pray for.

Because, as Jesus says, how can God help but answer our prayers?

Amen.