

“On prayer”

A homily for the people of St. Nicholas by Paul Brouillette

21 October 2007

The Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost

Jeremiah 31:27-34 + Psalm 119:97-104 + 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 + Luke 18:1-8

Bill Cosby once said that when children come before their parents, demanding that their parents settle some dispute — like “Johnny took my doll. Tell Johnny to give me the doll back” — the children erroneously assume that the parents are interested in justice. Cosby says that parents don’t care anything about justice — all they want is peace and quiet!

That judge in today’s gospel didn’t care about justice either, but with persistent prayer, the widow got what she wanted. What Jesus is trying to tell us is that God, who cares a whole lot more than that judge (and I might add even more than parents) will listen, will care, will act — so we must not “lose heart.”

That’s one part of Jesus’ message today — not to lose heart. The other part is that we must pray always.

What does he mean by that? He certainly does not mean that we must always be saying prayers. Prayer is not something we simply do now and then. Prayer is a way of life. Prayer gives us the answers to the basic questions of life — but we have to ask the right questions. And they have to be our own questions. Even if wiser people ask better questions and answer them with infallible certitude, that’s not our truth. Their answers come from their world, not from our grubby plot of land. They come to us from the outside. They are not part of us.

My training for the priesthood was a little different from what it is today. I started in high school at a prep seminary. So it took 13 years of formation and education to finally be ordained a Roman Catholic priest. All of those prep seminaries have been closed (for a lot of reasons that I won’t go into). But back then we had a very regimented approach to prayer. At the end of a long corridor, near the entrance to the chapel, there was a tall grandfather’s clock that would chime every 15 minutes. It was rigged up to be heard anywhere in and outside the building when it chimed. We had this practice called the *Quarterly Hour Prayer*, which meant we would stop what we were doing and say a brief 30-second prayer, led by the teacher if we were in class, another student if we were in study hall or on a work detail. I suppose this was one way to teach

us neophytes how to pray, but it was sort of like ramming it down our throats. Because we said it by rote too often, the practice soon became meaningless.

Since then I've come to realize that if all we do is ask someone else's questions, we end up saying prayers instead of praying. We make words with our minds instead of letting sighs escape from our hearts. Words are so much air; sighs, lighter than air, rise to heaven.

Prayer is a conversation with God. But before it can be an honest conversation, prayer is the effort to arrive at the truth about ourselves. Our own truth. If we are true to ourselves we will be true to God, the author of truth. And what is the truth about ourselves?

Our first encounter with truth is very dramatic. We have been floating around in a dark, warm womb when suddenly we are ejected into the cold, harsh light of day. And if that isn't enough, a huge hand slaps us. I don't know if our cry is a prayer, but it's from the heart.

From that point on we get the feeling that there is something radically wrong with the world and we are perpetually out of joint. And we spend a lifetime trying to figure out how to fit our crooked little lives into a huge cockeyed world. And that is prayer.

But good things happen, too. Mom is warm. Milk is sweet. The sun is bright. The colored leaves are fascinating. When I go for a morning run this time of year, I'm always struck by this wonder of God's creation. Sometimes people are nice too, and we can spend a lifetime wondering at the beauty of it all. And that is prayer.

As long as we live, we keep on discovering that life is more than we bargained for. Good things happen that exceed our wildest dreams and break into miracles.

Sad things stretch our endurance to the breaking point — and still we go on. Life never completely explains itself. We try to formulate all reality in one sentence but the last word always escapes us. Life refuses to come out even. We subtract the good from the bad and end up with a fraction. We add up all our experiences and have to carry one. Life refuses to be contained. The more we grow, the faster it expands; the faster we run, the quicker it spins away. Always just one tempting step ahead, coaxing us on into higher realms, until we hear a rustle of angels and catch a glimpse of God.

In prayer, we discover the greatest secret of all — that life is infinitely simple.

Once we realize that, perhaps we'll discover we've been praying all this time without uttering a word.

And there's one other thing about prayer that comes out of the widow's story: prayer needs to be connected to public action. Maggie Dawn (a professor at Cambridge) puts it this way: "The widow needed justice that private prayer alone would not deliver. We aren't called to pray passively, hoping that God will change the world on our behalf. Prayer may be the wind at our backs, but sometimes we need to track down the answer in person. As the African proverb says, 'When you pray, move your feet.'"^{*}

The good news is that God is not at all like that judge in the story told by Jesus. God is ready to give us grace. God was listening even before we started praying. God is eager, like a loving father and a caring mother, to listen to us. So let us pray always and not lose heart (as Jesus says today). We can trust God to give us what and when God knows best. Such is the mystery and wonder of this Heavenly Judge who loves us and will never let us go.

^{*} "Prayer Acts," Maggie Dawn (Christian Century, October 2, 2007, page 19)