

The Power of Prayer Persistence  
Or, The Need to Pray Always

It blows my mind to think about, but thirty years ago today I was in the midst of my fourth year of graduate school. I was at Arizona State University in Tempe, working on a doctoral degree in classical guitar performance. My vocational call, I thought, was to teach guitar at a major university. In fact, it was looking like I might just have that sewed up. There were only two such openings at that time, but both universities had expressed interest in me after I sent them my letter of application and vitae. Surely one of these is going to work out! I thought to myself.

My prayer life picked up dramatically during this time. I usually rode my bike to ASU, and both on my way there and my way back I would pray, “God, give me one of these two jobs [or better yet, give me both, so I can choose between them]. Oh yeah, uh, ‘please.’” (Just in case God likes it when we say please.) One of these openings, at Milliken University in Illinois, had an earlier deadline for the application, so for a while I focused just on that one. The job description seemed to fit my strengths and interests perfectly. I was sure I was their best candidate. I kept praying, and waited for their answer. Finally, the phone call came—they were going to go with their in-house candidate. But thank you for your interest, and best wishes for your career. Rats!

Oh well, there is still the other opening, at the College of Charleston, in South Carolina. That one seems like an even better fit for me, I thought. And who wants to live in Illinois anyway, when one can live in a harbor town? They invited me out for an interview and a recital audition. I felt I both played and talked really well. Once again, I felt sure I was their best candidate. Surely this is the one that is going to work out. Just to make sure, I prayed even more. “God, please let me have this job. Make that pretty please.”

After at least a month of waiting—and of praying—the phone call came. “The search committee was very impressed with your qualifications. But we have decided to hire our in-house candidate.” I couldn’t believe it. I was devastated. Why, God? So much for my prayer life.

That very same day, I got a call from a friend, who was the Executive Director at Camp Friedenswald in Michigan, which happened to be the place where my wife Lois and I had met, and two years later had gotten married. In our conversation, my friend mentioned that he was resigning, and the current Program Director was going to take over as the ED. So in case you’re interested—and I realize you’re probably not, given the degree you’re working so hard on—Friedenswald is going to be looking for a new Program Director.

About four months later, Lois and I packed our possessions into a U-Haul truck and moved to Michigan. I had been hired as the Program Director at Camp Friedenswald. And as the days and weeks and months passed, it became clear: God apparently had answered my persistent praying after all.

The opening line in today’s text rings a familiar bell for me. “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart.” What does Luke mean by the phrase “their need to pray always?” Does this need come from without, or from within? Is it someone

else, maybe even Jesus, saying to them “You need to pray always?” Or is it their own inner voice saying, “I need to pray always?” Leaving that question unanswered, Luke launches into yet another one of Jesus’ parables (this one sometimes referred to as the “Parable of the Unjust Judge”). Jesus’ very first sentence is puzzling. He introduces us to a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In biblical times those were the two most basic requirements for someone to be a judge. That you care about people—that is, are committed to seeking justice for absolutely everyone, without partiality—and, that you constantly look and listen for God’s guidance. This quack was doing neither. How did he get to be a judge?

Then in the next verse we meet a certain widow. Again in biblical times a widow was a woman who had lost her husband, and because of which had lost all of her financial resources, and her standing in the community. “Widows and orphans” are frequently named together as the two most vulnerable types of people in the Hebrew community, the two in most dire need of justice. And justice is precisely what she kept asking for. Justice against her “opponent.” Which in this case might be a particular person, or it might just be a stand-in for an unjust society in general.

The woman “kept coming” to this unjust, worthless judge, kept asking him, pleading with him for justice, and even this judge finally caved, gave her what she was asking for. Specifically because of her persistence. How much more, Jesus is claiming, will God, who loves every one of us, grant us justice when we cry out to him day and night in prayer.

According to Luke 18:1, we need to pray always and not lose heart. The question is, whom should we pray be praying for? Is it okay to pray for ourselves? That we’ll get a certain job we really want? That we’ll get an A on an upcoming test? That Tabor College will win their next game? That will find the cell phone or keys we lost? (How many of you have prayed that prayer? ☺) That we will receive the justice, the fair treatment, that we have a right to? A fair decision in a court of law, perhaps? At least a fair hearing in some otherwise unjust situation we are facing?

Does it matter how often we pray? Or simply, how we pray? And of course, what we pray for and why? Does God distinguish between our needs and our wants? Is there a certain formula that is more effective than others?

Or, is it better to pray for others? For their healing, perhaps? For a successful surgery? A successful examination or job interview? We do a lot of this kind of praying here at church on Sundays and Wednesdays. (In fact, mostly this kind of praying.)

Or, is it better to pray for the world as a whole? For peace and justice and the health of the environment? Jesus’ parable about Parable of the Unjust Judge mentions the word “justice” four times in eight short verses. Is this what matters most to God? Is this the kind of praying God will answer more frequently and quickly? Or what if we simply pray for Jesus—the Son of Man, the Lord of the universe—to come quickly that he might redeem the world? (Interestingly, this apparently was what many of Jesus’ disciples had already been praying for. And by the time Luke finished his gospel, Jesus hadn’t yet returned. Which is why Luke encourages them not to lose heart. He’ll come. Just in his time, not ours.

And when he comes, how much and what kind of faith will he find? Will he find us caring about and praying for the right things? Will he find us using the right words? Will he find us praying at all?

We need to pray always. For one reason, and probably the most important reason, it keeps us in touch with God. Or we might say, “in tune with” God. With what God’s will is,

with what God's Kingdom looks like. And yes, we should pray persistently, pray day and night. It only makes sense—the more often we pray, the more in tune with God we will be.

Does a loving God such as ours answer our prayers? Does God grant them? Is there a difference between the two?

Lois and I ended up living and serving at Camp Friedenswald for six years! During which time I finished and defended my dissertation, earned my doctorate, and even taught guitar at nearby Goshen College. But then, seemingly out of the blue, we started getting calls from churches—specifically churches looking for a pastor. Asking us if we would consider it. Us?! Lois had a only nine seminary credit hours to her name. Guess how many I had. Zero. Guess how many Bible classes I took in college. Zero.

But it gradually started dawning on us that ministry is precisely what we had been doing the last six years here at Camp. When the offer came to serve as Co-Associate Pastors at the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita, we took it. After all, we reasoned, that would move us and our two daughters closer to my parents in North Newton. And it would allow me to teach guitar at Bethel and Hesston colleges. Which I ended up doing. Maybe I was going to reach my vocational goal after all.

Three years later, when their lead pastor retired, Lorraine Avenue called us to be their co-lead pastors. We astonishingly, humbly said yes. And I don't think I've taught a guitar lesson since. Nor have I missed it.

We ended up staying at Lorraine Avenue twenty-two years. During which time we both earned our Master of Divinity degrees, and I had a whole lot of Bible classes. Oh yeah, we also had one more daughter.

Did God grant my fervent, persistent praying? Not exactly. Did God answer my prayers? Oh yeah.

Sometime I'll have to tell you the story of how I ended up at First Mennonite Church here in Hillsboro.