

**The Greatest Test of Our Faith  
Luke 18:1-8  
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**In one of her sermons, Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a seven year-old girl named Madeline. The occasion was Madeline's seventh birthday. Madeline was celebrating with her mother and with her grandparents – but her father was not there because Madeline's parents were no longer married.**

**The moment came for the birthday cake; the singing of “Happy Birthday”; and the blowing out of the candles. But when Madeline leaned over to blow out the seven flickering flames she did so without making a wish.**

**Surprised, her mother asked, “Aren't you going to make a wish?”**

**Her grandfather chimed in, “You have to make a wish.”**

**To no one in particular, Madeline said, “I don't know why I keep doing this”.**

**“Doing what?” they asked. “This wishing thing,” she said, looking at the empty chair at the table. She said: “Last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away, but she did. This year I want to wish that my mommy and daddy will get back together.”**

**As gently as one can say such things, her mother said: “I'm sorry, but that's not going to happen, so don't waste your wish on that.” To which Madeline replied, “I know its not going to happen – so why do I keep doing this?”<sup>i</sup>**

**“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always, and not to lose heart.”**

**Wishes are not exactly the same thing as prayers;  
and unfulfilled wishes are not precisely the same thing as unanswered prayers;  
but those moments when our prayers are met with apparent divine silence may sometimes be the moments when we are the most spiritually vulnerable;  
vulnerable to feelings of bitterness;  
vulnerable to feelings of discouragement;  
vulnerable to feelings of cynicism;  
vulnerable to losing heart.**

**In one of his sermons, the distinguished German theologian, Helmut Thielicke, expressed it with eloquent succinctness. He said: “The silence of God is the greatest test of our faith.”**

**At the church I served in Pennsylvania, one of my members was a woman who had lost, not one - but all three of her children - to cystic fibrosis. Through her I came into possession of a book written more than 50 years ago by J. B. Phillips called, “Is God at Home? At the outset of that book, Phillips posed a rhetorical question that is as relevant today as it was half a century ago. Said Phillips: “Most people believe in some kind of God – but many people find it very hard to believe in God as a Person who is interested in the world and in the people to whom He has given life. Terrible things happen in the world ... examples of injustice abound ...and some people conclude that although there probably is a God, God is a long way off and doesn’t trouble to interfere with the problems of this planet. God may be “at home” in his own inaccessible heaven, but apparently God is not “at home” for us poor mortals who sometimes long for the reassurance that he cares about us.”<sup>ii</sup>**

**Temptations to spiritual discouragement and cynicism are not new to our generation. Jesus and his disciples were all too familiar with political injustice; they lived their entire lives within the context of the long-term occupation of their nation by a not-always-benevolent Roman army. Jesus and his disciples were all too familiar with socio-economic injustice; they lived in a world where the rich and powerful routinely exploited the poor and the powerless. Which is to say that Jesus and his disciples were no strangers to the temptation to say, “How long, O Lord?”**

**So Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always – and not to lose heart.”**

**It was a simple story through which Jesus intended to make a vital point. Jesus began by introducing us to the story’s two characters. Neither character is introduced by name; instead Jesus provides a thumbnail description of their personalities and the nature of their relationship.**

**Jesus declares that in one corner - wearing the black robe - was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. It was not a complementary introduction. The Book of Proverbs says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom - and so one may assume that a judge who did not fear God was not setting any new standards for the wise administration of justice either.**

**In the other corner - said Jesus - dressed in the black apparel of a widow in mourning - was a woman who we are told kept coming to the judge and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' Jesus does not say what injury or loss the widow may have suffered; Jesus simply tells us that she was unrelentingly persistent in pursuing justice.**

**The confrontation between the widow and the judge was like an irresistible force bumping up against an immovable object.**

**In one corner there was an arrogant judge - who had a great deal of power, but very few scruples - and in the other corner there was a persistent widow - who had very little power, but absolutely nothing to lose.**

**And Jesus tells us, in effect, that the judge was the first one to blink. Jesus said that at first the judge refused to grant justice to the widow - but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone - because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."**

**If the story were a fable the moral would probably be that persistence and perseverance pay off - and there is some truth in that.**

**But this story is not a fable - it is a parable - and Luke invites us to understand that this encounter between the judge and the widow - not only has something to teach us about the power of persistence - it also has something to teach us about the nature of prayer - and about the character of God.**

**The counsel to be persistent in prayer echoes throughout the Bible.**

**In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul urged the Christians of that city to be "patient in tribulation and constant in prayer." In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul was even more concise, when he said simply, "pray without ceasing."**

**In some ways the idea that at times it may be necessary to be persistent in prayer goes against the grain of our rapid-response culture. We have grown accustomed to the marvels of instant messaging - and drive through service - and digital technology - and we have grown equally impatient with the experience of delayed gratification. And yet Jesus has the temerity to say that when it comes to**

**prayer - when it comes to addressing our petitions to the Almighty - we are to be persistent - and patient - and constant – and perhaps above all - that we should not lose heart.**

**This is a parable that challenges us to persevere; but at a deeper level it is a parable about the character of God. God is not to be confused with the judge in this story; the point is that if even an unjust judge can be prevailed upon to grant justice, then how much more certain is it that a loving God will respond to those who cry to him day and night.**

**As someone once said: “Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance; prayer is laying hold of God’s highest willingness.” Or as Jesus himself said: “Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”**

**It is not hard to understand the point of the parable.**

**Why then is it often so hard to understand those moments of silence that really are the greatest test of our faith? How are we to remain persistent in prayer at those moments when we are vulnerable to bitterness; at those moments when we are tempted to question whether or not God is at home?**

**Let me tell you a story – that you may or may not think has anything to do with those questions. It is an imaginative story that Fred Craddock tells in one of his sermons. At the outset of the story a family is out for a leisurely drive on a Sunday afternoon. Suddenly, from the back seat comes the loud, excited, and pleading voices of the two children. “Daddy, Daddy, stop the car! There’s a kitten back there on the side of the road.”**

**The father says, “So there’s a kitten on the side of the road. So what?”**

**“We have to stop and pick it up.”**

**“We certainly do not have to stop and pick it up.”**

**“But Daddy, if we don’t stop and pick it up, it will die.”**

**“Well then, it will have to die. We don’t have any more room for any more animals. We practically have a zoo at the house already.”**

**“We never thought our Daddy would be so mean and cruel as to let a kitten die.”**

**[Persistence takes many forms – and persistence does not always fight fair.]**

**Finally, the mother intervenes. “Dear, you’ll have to stop.”**

**The father turns the car around, returns to the spot, and pulls off to the side of the road. “You kids stay in the car. I’ll see about it.”**

**He goes out to pick up the little kitten, who is just skin and bones, sore-eyed, and full of fleas. When he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy the kitten bristles, hisses, and bares its teeth and claws. His hand receives a few minor scratches, but he finally manages to pick up the kitten by the loose skin at the neck, and bring it over to the car. He gives the children fair warning: “Don’t touch it. It’s probably got leprosy.”**

**Back home they go. When they get to the house the children give the kitten several baths, about a gallon of warm milk, and continue to offer the equivalent of prayers of intercession on the kitten’s behalf: “Can we let it stay in the house – just tonight? Tomorrow we’ll fix it a place in the garage.” The father says, “Sure, take my bedroom.”**

**They fix a comfortable bed, fit for a pharaoh. Several weeks pass. Then one day the father walks in, feels something rub against his leg. He looks down, and there is a cat. He reaches down toward the cat, carefully checking to see that no one is watching. When the cat sees his hand, it does not bare its claws and hiss; instead it arches its back to receive a caress. Is that the same cat? It is hard to believe that it could be the same as that frightened, hurt, hissing kitten on the side of the road – but you know as well as I do what made the difference.**

**Said Craddock: “Not too long ago God reached out a hand to bless me and my family. When God did, I looked at that hand; it was covered with scratches. Such is the hand of love, extended to those who are bitter.”<sup>iii</sup>**

**Earlier in this sermon I quoted Helmut Thielicke who said that “The silence of God is the greatest test of our faith.” In that same sermon – a sermon preached to a German congregation during World War II while the Battle of Stalingrad was being fought on the Eastern front – Thielicke went on to make an extraordinary point.**

**He said “the silence of God is the greatest test of our faith ... but the cross was God’s greatest silence. [There at the cross] the power of darkness was allowed to make its final bid against the Son of God ... And God had nothing to say. There was simply the cry of the Dying asking of the silence ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’**

**But now [said Thielicke] – now hear the great mystery of this silence. The very hour when God answered not a word or syllable [to his Son on the cross] was the hour of the great turning point when the veil of the temple was rent and God’s heart was laid bare with all its wounds. Even when He was silent, God suffered with us. In His silence God experienced the fellowship of death and the depths with us. Even when we thought He did not care ... He did His work of love. We live in the power of this Golgotha night of silence. Where should we be without the cross? <sup>iv</sup>**

**Earlier in this sermon I quoted J. B. Philips who asked the rhetorical question, “Is God at Home?”. J. B. Phillips went on to answer his own question by observing that the “good news of the Christian faith is that although God is “at home” – he did not stay at home. Instead ... he entered into the life of this world by being born and living a human life” in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>v</sup>**

**Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. Be persistent in prayer said Jesus. When you are tempted to wonder whether God is at home, keep knocking until the door is opened. And when your prayers are met with apparent silence, keep asking until the silence is pierced by the Word of God.**

**To His name be all honor, glory, and praise. AMEN**

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way, pp. 198-199.

<sup>ii</sup> J. B. Phillips, Is God at Home, pp. 15-16.

<sup>iii</sup> Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories. Pp. 24-25.

<sup>iv</sup> Helmut Thielicke, The Silence of God. Eerdmans, 1962. pp.12-20.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.