

Sermon on Sunday 5 May 2024

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5. 12-18 & Luke 18. 1-8

God-bothering

A few months ago, I awoke to a scratching and a scurrying from the roof-space just above my bed. It turns out a squirrel was squatting in the loft. The Diocesan Pest Control Guy was duly summoned. He laid some bait and returned a few days later. The bait had gone but, despite that, the squirrel continued its early morning tap-dance on the ceiling. The next step was to attach a trap to the side of the house which the squirrel, of course, sprung without capture. *Six* times the Pest Control Guy came. Never had he met such a squirrel.

Most days we'd have a face-off, the squirrel and I. It would sit on the fence staring at me with its beady little eyes, laughing. 'This is my house,' he seemed to be saying, and the longer this went on, the more frayed my nerves became.

'Our last resort,' said the Pest Guy, finally, 'is to seal up the suspected entrance. But be warned, the squirrel will do everything and anything in its power to get inside'. 'It's a question,' he went on to say, 'of trusting that the house is strong enough to resist.'

Well, the squirrel did its absolute darnedest. For the next few days, RoboSquirrel gnawed and chewed and scratched at the house, but on the third day, praise be, the squirrel finally admitted defeat and moved away to terrorise some other unsuspecting household.

As much as it became my nemesis, I had to admire the persistence and perseverance of the squirrel.

There are one or two obvious parallels here between Squirrelgate and our parable today.

The writer, Luke, introduces the story as an encouragement to Jesus' followers to be persistent in prayer and to never give up. The main protagonist is a widow who pesters an unsympathetic judge for justice, until eventually he's worn down and concedes.

Now, it's obvious, I hope, that Jesus isn't here comparing his God to the reluctant and shady judge. God's nature is rooted in justice, particularly for those on the margins. The key to his story is found in what Jesus ends by saying: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?"

The writer Barbara Brown Taylor says, "I keep coming back to that sad little question at the end of the parable. It makes you think that Jesus did not know too many persistent widows, or at least not enough of them. He did not know too many people with enough faith to stay at anything forever. Then as now, most

people prayed like they brush their teeth — once in the morning and once at night, as part of a daily spiritual hygiene routine.”

So, it's a parable about faith, about being faithfully persistent in prayer. Like I had to trust the structure of the house, we have to trust that prayer matters and that prayer changes things. Let's be clear, prayer doesn't change God's mind. God is committed to the very best for us and for the world. Prayer doesn't change God. Mostly, prayer changes us. And when people change, things change.

We are shaped by our prayers. When we pray, we begin to tune into the heart of God and, slowly, with time, we begin to align our own hearts with his; we begin to see how he sees, feels what he feels. It shifts our perspective and softens our hearts. And in prayer God tunes into our intuition and, through our intuition, speaks. But, and here's the thing, it takes time; it takes persistence and perseverance. 'Pray continually,' as the letter to the Thessalonians advises.

Prayer can become a way of life, but it takes practice. It's about consciously bringing God into every moment and, for me, there are two good ways to do this; practice gratitude and allow space. Punctuate your day with gratitude, with moments to consciously stop and stare; to appreciate and give thanks for a myriad of daily miracles. And, secondly, reserve moments to stop and with open hands invite God to allow those things and people who need to be held in light today, to surface in our minds. And then, with or without words, hold them in that light of love and attention.



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The most important thing about prayer, actually, isn't if it's answered or not. The most important thing is the relationship it builds and creates. In prayer, we learn to trust God with our past and our present and our future. Prayer isn't a divine vending machine. It's a day-by-day choice to keep entrusting our lives and the life

of the world to the Divine. It's sharing all that we are, and all that we hope for. And in that sharing, we are changed.

So, this parable isn't about wearing God down 'til we get from him what we want. It's a parable about not giving up on the relationship we were made for.

It's about every day asking that our wills align with His will. It's about having faith in the process, regardless of what comes of it, because the process itself gives us life.

When Barbara Brown Taylor's granddaughter asked her outright if prayer really works, she said, "Oh, sweetie, of course it does. It keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart. It's how we bother God, and how God bothers us back. There's nothing that works any better than that."

She goes on to say:

“What the persistent widow knows is that the most important time to pray is when your prayers seem meaningless. If you don’t go and say a few prayers and demand from the judge what you want, what are you going to do? Take to your bed with a box of Kleenex and complain about how horrible life is? Just forget about the justice or the peace for today? No. Day by day by day, you are going to get up, wash your face, go down there and ask for what you want. You know the routine. You know what will happen, but you will not let their reaction rob you of what gives your life its dignity. You are going to trust the process, regardless of what comes of it. Because it is the process itself, the asking and the going, that gives your life its shape, its meaning, its direction. The process keeps you alive, engaged, focused and involved with what matters most in your life, so you do not lose heart.”

Yesterday, many of us were praying that God would prompt the right person to answer our call for the position of Children and Families Worker. It’s been a long time waiting, but let’s not lose heart. Let’s trust God with this. Let’s persist in prayer, cooperating with the flow of God’s will and power. Let’s trust that our prayers connect with and release God’s transforming energy into the world; that they make a difference, starting with us; with you and with me.

Luke 18:1-8

(New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge

18 Then Jesus^[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"^[b] ⁶ And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

1 Thessalonians 5. 12-18

¹² Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.