

“Don’t Give Up”

The old hymn sings that it is our privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. The tune and the words of this faith song are called easily to mind, especially for those of us who grew up in the church. “What a friend we have in Jesus,” we sing, “all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.” We know the song but I’m not sure about the message. Have you ever thought of prayer as a privilege? We think of prayer as a religious activity. Prayer is part of our worship experience, of course, and maybe even a duty on our part, something that is expected of us as people of faith, but I’m not sure we would often describe prayer as a privilege. When we are in possession of a privilege it is not because we deserve it. A privilege isn’t something we gain for ourselves. A privilege is a gift. Privilege is granted to us. It’s made possible because someone gives us access to what would not otherwise be ours. Privilege means we are special, that we have an advantage, that we are blessed and honored. Prayer as privilege? Well, now that we think about it, privilege isn’t a bad way to describe prayer, at all. Jesus was a man of prayer. His very life was a direct connection to God. We know the experience of prayer was an extension of who Jesus was because the gospel tells us he regularly pulled away to a quiet place to pray. But prayer wasn’t just about him. He wanted prayerful lives to be who we are. For this reason, Jesus taught his followers that to live with him meant being connected to God in the way he was. He taught us to pray, “Our Father, who art heaven, hallowed by your name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth...” Jesus not only saves us by way of his grace and love, Jesus grants us the privilege that was his, access to God. There is no time or place in our lives, no circumstance of any kind, when we are not fully able to connect with God’s purpose for our lives. Yes, we are a privileged people in this faith because we can take everything to God, and God’s faithfulness will not disappoint us.

Jesus wants us to pray, and the parable story he tells, the story we have heard today, encourages us so that we will not lose heart. Jesus knew all about us. He knew that sometimes the worries and weight of the world press us down. He wants us to pray because prayer can keep us going. The honest truth is, all of us lose heart every now and then. An article from the World Health Organization estimates that 300 million of the world’s people suffer from severe depression. Most of us have some experience with this, either by what we battle personally or because someone we know or love suffers from chronic feelings of despair and emotional weakness. There are some who have deep episodes that are nearly paralyzing and others of us experience seasonal bouts when we can’t shake the gloomy feeling that colors our outlook or lessens our hope. The mission of Jesus is for the purpose of lifting us up. Jesus assures us that God’s goodness is always there and persistent prayer is a way for us to be connected to the presence of God that wraps around us when we need it most. Prayer is not magic. It can’t change the world but it can change us and how we react to what’s happening in the world. Prayer is our path to hope.

The story Jesus tells is about a widow who would not take “no” for an answer. She was dealing with a hard-hearted judge. It’s a remarkable story because widows in that day were the lowest of the low. The culture back then was heavily male-centered. This meant that a woman without her man was a nobody. She had no voice, no position, and no way to establish security for her life. In the story, the widow keeps coming to the heartless judge until he is forced to respond to her needs. Jesus makes the point that if a persistent widow can find justice in her life how much more will we find the answer to our need from a God who is infinitely merciful and loving. She didn’t give up and it’s that kind of determination in our lives, a persistence in our prayer, Jesus says, that keeps us coming to God where we will experience how our deepest needs will be met.

As I pulled my thoughts together for my message this morning, my mind was flooded with the memory of a recorded song I came across years ago. The song is connected to a story told by an English composer named, Gavin Bryars. Earlier in his musical career, back in 1971, Gavin was working on a documentary about homeless folk in some of the roughest areas in London, England. One day, he and a friend were doing some filming of the people they’d met on the streets. He writes about his experience saying, “In the course of being filmed, some people broke into drunken song - sometimes bits of opera, sometimes sentimental ballads - but one,” he wrote, “who in fact did not drink, sang a religious song...” Gavin goes on to say that the song the man sang was, “Jesus, Never Failed Me Yet.” Gavin describes the old man, in tattered clothes and leaning against a building, as quietly singing the lyrics of this song over and over. “Jesus’ blood never failed me yet,” he sang, “never failed me yet. This one thing I know, that he loves me so. Jesus, never failed me yet.” This isn’t a song that is familiar to most of us. It’s not included in the top 10 Sunday School songs. It’s not in our hymn books, as far as I know, but the message of the song is one we are very familiar with and this message is why we pray in Jesus’ name.

I remembered Gavin Bryars story about this man with no home and I remembered the warmth it brought to my heart. The man was homeless, and some he was hopeless, but there he was singing about the love of Jesus. What

a beautiful testimony to the power of God's love for all of us. I wanted to tell you this story but I thought it would be even better to hear some of the recording Gavin Bryars made of the man's singing. It starts out with just the old man's voice and then Gavin adds recorded tracks of string instruments, an accompaniment he wrote to add to the voice of the man. Gavin said that as people hear his recording it's possible they won't get it, and he understands that. Maybe it won't hit us in any particular way this morning. But, Gavin believes that those who do get it, those who can sense the persistent power God that never gives up, well, there is no more beautiful melody on earth. Let me play a little of the song for us now. [go to this link to hear the song: [Gavin Bryars - Jesus Never Failed Me](#)] The man died before he had a chance to know the way in which his voice had been captured, preserving his extraordinary testimony to faith. Jesus doesn't want us to pray just when we are thankful things are going well, nor does Jesus want us to pray only when we're in trouble. Jesus wants us to never give up in our prayer because the old man had it right. God will never fail us, not ever.

As with every story in the gospel, the one for today brings us to the place where we're left to decide what difference it makes in our lives. What will our lives of prayer be like today and through the days of this week? First of all, we won't give up. Now, there is a caution here. To be persistent in our prayer doesn't mean we should keep pestering God until God makes happen what we want to happen. Remember, the woman was after justice and remember, Jesus taught us to pray asking for God's will to be done. The goal of persistent prayer isn't to get God to come around to our purpose but to connect us to the purpose of God. This week, when we think about what we want for ourselves, or what we want for our families, or what we want for the church, or for our nation, or for our world, may our prayer connect us to what God wants. "God, help me see you in this person or in this situation. God, make your desires known. May your way be clear, O God. May your will be done, in Jesus' name."

May you will be done, in Jesus. He's never failed us yet. Amen.