

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
October 28, 2007
Luke 18: 1-14
“Our Prayers”

By our prayers, presence, gifts, and service -- that's how we promise to uphold the church. It's a promise we make for ourselves when we join the church, and it's a promise we renew every time someone else joins the church. Today – and for the next four Sundays -- it's also a promise we're going to examine and celebrate as part of our annual stewardship program. We've already begun -- by hearing Bridgett share what prayer means to her, and by filling out our blessing leaf on how prayer has touched our own lives. Before you leave today, you are invited to draw a card out of the basket to take home with you. You are to be in prayer for the duration of our campaign for the person whose name is on that card. So in a variety of ways we are already living out what it means to uphold the church with our prayers. Now, though, we turn to today's Gospel readings for another way to look at prayer. I want to lift up each parable for just a bit -- and have us to do some reflecting on what each parable teaches us about prayer.

I'll begin with the story in Luke's gospel about two men who go to the Temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, or in other words a good church member, and the other is a tax collector, or in other words a bad church member. The Pharisee, you'll remember, is devout and charitable and law-abiding. He does everything he is expected to do, and even more than is expected. He doesn't just fast on the special holy days as required by the law; he fasts twice a week, and he doesn't just tithe the foods and animals as

specified in the religious law, he tithes all his income. The Pharisee, therefore, has really taken to heart the demands of his religion. He talks the talk and he walks the walk. The tax collector, on the other hand, doesn't. He engages in a number of unethical business practices, and because of his profession, he has not taken the high road in terms of living his life or practicing his faith. Both men are at the Temple, but they are as different from each other as night and day. So the problem is not that one is religious and one isn't. The problem is how they see themselves and each other.

We hear the Pharisee's prayer first: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." We can summarize the Pharisee's prayer like this, "There, but for your grace O God, go I." You have given me so much God, and I am so thankful. I have enough to eat, so I am not a beggar. I am satisfied with my income, so I am not an extortioner. I obey your law, and so I am not unjust. I do not commit adultery. I am so glad, God, that I am who I am, a Pharisee, and not this tax collector." The Pharisee can't help but be glad for who and what he is. When we look around, and see the miserable lot of others, he is grateful that his position in life is different.

Well, I know I've prayed like the Pharisee -- haven't you? "There but for the grace of God" is a prayer I'm sure we all know. When we're walking down a hospital corridor, or through a courthouse, we can't help but be thankful that we are not the ones lying there in pain, or the ones facing criminal charges. When we experience some kind of hardship, we can always think of someone else a little worse off, and that can help put things in perspective. Well, we tell ourselves, at least I'm not that sick, or at least I still have a job, or at least my family is still together. How many of you have said a prayer of

gratitude that you're living in Cleveland right now instead of southern California? Or in the United States instead of Iraq?

When my son was in the hospital as a baby having surgeries, I remember praying a thank you to God that at least my baby's problems weren't as bad as the other babies on that hospital floor. My baby didn't need heart surgery; my baby wasn't dying; my baby wasn't born brain damaged. I thanked God that my baby, while needing some corrective surgery, was bright and strong and expected to live a full, normal life. I thanked God that I wouldn't have to care for a permanently disabled child the rest of my life. I thanked God that I would get to take my baby home from the hospital and play with him. I hope I prayed for those other parents, but to be honest, I don't remember. I just remember that seeing all those other sick babies put my own troubles in perspective, and helped me deal with what I had to deal with. But still, it was a pretty selfish prayer, wasn't it? And I remembered that when I was pregnant with my other children. And my prayer changed. Carrying Alex and Grace, I never once prayed to God that I would have a perfect baby, or that the baby would even necessarily be healthy. Because I remembered all those other babies I saw when Andrew was a baby, and I remembered those other parents, and so what I prayed for was simply that I would be given the strength and the courage and the faith I would need to love and care for the baby I was carrying, for as long as that baby would be my child, and in whatever condition that baby would be born in.

When we read our newspapers and magazines and watch our televisions and see with our own eyes all the suffering that goes on in our world, our prayer is, let's be honest, sometimes the Pharisee's prayer. "Thank God I live where I live and have the

kind of life I have, and I don't have to deal with what those people are dealing with. Thank God my kids can get a good education and have enough to eat, and grow up to get a job and have a decent life. I've said that prayer -- haven't you? But you know, in my better moments, I have another prayer -- and because I know you, and I know your faithfulness and your kindness and your generosity, I know you have another prayer, too. Which is the tax collector's prayer -- "Have mercy on me, a sinner" -- or "have mercy on me, O God, for not sharing as much as I could share, or not loving as much as I could love, or not doing all I can do to make things better for others." It's the prayer that admits how unfair things are in the world, and that acknowledges our own responsibility to make things better. Don't you think that by praying the way he did, the tax collector knew that how he was living his life was wrong, and that by praying that prayer, he wanted to change it? The Bible doesn't come out and tell us that, but that's what I think. He didn't compare himself to anyone else. He simply acknowledged his own sinfulness, and turned it over to God. I don't think it's enough to be grateful for what we have -- and for how good our lives are in comparison with others. No, the needs and suffering of others ought to convict us -- and bring us to our knees in shame for all the abundance around us -- and out of that shame, call us to get up from our knees and take action. To change the things in our own lives we can change -- to increase our pledge, to use less water, to recycle, to support legislation that gives aid and corrects injustice, to be an advocate in whatever ways we can for the poor, to be involved in outreach in whatever ways we can to alleviate suffering. The prayer of the Pharisee supports the status quo. The prayer of the tax collector leads to transformation. I know both prayers -- I also know which one leads to emptiness, and which one leads to fullness. I still sometimes pray the Pharisee's prayer, but it's the tax collector's prayer that draws me closer to God, and the prayer I strive to pray more

often. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” is the prayer that will lead to change – it is the prayer that turns tax collectors into disciples, and sinners into servants. It’s the prayer that leads church people like you and me to be agents for change all around the world.

The next gospel story I want to lift up is the one Jesus tells about the persistent widow. Listen again to how it goes: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may wear me out by continually coming.’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.’”

I have always been fascinated by this story. I think of my kids who through the years certainly wore me down with their whining and complaining and ended up getting more of what they wanted than what I intended. Is that how we are to pray? Well, I think there’s a difference between whining and persistence – right? The widow had a just cause. She wasn’t being greedy, she wasn’t the kid in the toy store who throws a tantrum in front of everyone and embarrasses the mother so much she gives in just to get the kid to stop screaming. No, she really needed what she was asking for, and so she kept on asking. That’s not whining -- that’s endurance, that’s being unwilling to settle for less, that’s being willing to stick it out. Have you ever given up with your

prayers? Have you ever got so tired of waiting you just stopped praying? It's easy to do, I think. Especially when what we're praying for is something big, something important, something life-changing. The widow needed and asked for justice. Not a new car. Not an A on her test. Not a winning lottery ticket. Not a victory on the football field. Not even a normal mammogram. Not even a successful round of chemotherapy. No, she asked for justice. She asked for what would restore her life and the lives the others. She asked for the right thing to be done.

You know, every Sunday in my pastoral prayer I pray for peace. Every Sunday I pray for the lives of the world's suffering to be helped. For the poor to be fed and the homeless to be sheltered and the sick to be healed and the orphans to be loved and the outcasts to be included. The particular words may vary from week to week, but the basics of that prayer haven't changed since I began praying pastoral prayers in church. And I imagine I'll continue praying that basic prayer for all the years of my ministry to come. As you have prayed, and as you will continue to pray. It's a prayer we can't afford to give up praying. For its results are results we can't afford to stop waiting for. The unjust judges of the world may hold off, but I do believe that eventually God's intentions for the world's people will come to pass. God wants justice to be done. God wants suffering to be alleviated. God wants peace to reign. I believe that. And so I believe that we have to keep on praying. Even when it gets dark. Even when there is no answer. Even when we get tired. Even when we wonder if our praying does any good.

What if we saw ourselves as today's persistent widows in the world? What would that mean? That even though the problems of the world keep growing, so would our

resolve, so would our commitment, so would our generosity. We wouldn't give up. We'd stick up for people other people want to ignore. We'd support causes other people find objectionable or unpopular. We wouldn't listen to all the people who say things can't be changed -- that we should just take care of ourselves and let happen whatever will happen. No, we'd say. No, we'd shout. No, we'd argue. Children getting killed on the streets of Cleveland matter to us and we will not give up on them. Children dying of AIDS in Africa matter to us and we will not give up on them. Young men and women being sent to fight in Iraq matter to us and we will not give up on them. Israelis and Palestinians who want to live in peace matter to us and will we not give up on them. Women who can't read in Afghanistan matter to us and we will not give up on them. Orphans in Brazil matter to us and we will not give up. People all around the world who have to cook and clean with dirty water matter to us and we will not give up. And so on. Yes, the problems are immense. And yes, we've been praying for God's kingdom to come on earth for a very long time now, but we will keep on praying, and we will keep on demanding justice, and we will keep on doing the things we can to make a difference. Because justice matters. Because peace matters. Because love matters. Because the earth matters. Because every human life matters. We will not give up. As a congregation, as Christians, we will pray always, and not lose heart.

And now I want to add one more gospel reading -- still from Luke -- in chapter 22:

"He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw; knelt

down, and prayed, 'Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.'

So prayed Jesus on the night of his betrayal and arrest and conviction. And in many ways, I suspect, so have we all prayed. I know I have. And I also know that more often than not, the cups I wanted removed were not removed, and the cups I wanted added were not added. For I know what it is to have my prayers dealt with in ways contrary or at least different to ways I requested. Loved ones died who I prayed not to die. Things came apart that I prayed to stay together. Hard roads that I prayed to be avoided were not avoided. I can fill in my particulars on these statements -- and you could fill in yours. We all know what it is to have things turn out differently than we requested, than we yearned for, than we prayed for. But, you know, I can't say that God's wasn't done in those times. I don't mean that I think the hard things that happened were God's will -- I do mean that God's will got carried out through how those things were dealt with -- through the process of healing, through the support and encouragement and love of others, through new beginnings, through the growth and insight that were experienced. While my prayers at the time did not get the result I wanted, other results did come. And in those other results, God saw me through, and somehow I have to believe God's will has been done. Jesus prayed his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane at least three times, the gospels tell us. I know my prayer is an ongoing one -- and the outcome is still in progress.. For not my will, but God's to be done in my life -- and in the lives of those I love, and in the lives of all God's people around the world.

I'll close now by saying that what matters most about prayer is not its technique or frequency or the eloquence of its words. I'm no prayer guru, you know. I am not one

who can point to certain days and times and say with absolute certainty that my prayers got answered in this way or that way. It still rains even when I pray for it not to. People I lay hands on in the hospital still die. Problems I pray to be resolved don't always get resolved. What I've learned the most about prayer, is simply to keep the conversation going. I've learned to talk to God even when I'm not sure God is listening. I've learned to expand my prayers outside my own comfort zone – and, hopefully, as I am still maturing in my faith, to pray more for others than for myself. Because maybe the rain I don't want is what the farmer needs. Or maybe the resolution I have in mind isn't the resolution best for everyone. Or maybe God intends me to use the wounds in my heart to be more understanding and patient with the wounds in the hearts of others. Or maybe God just wants me to chill out, and not try to figure everything out, but let him use the people and the events and circumstances in my life to fulfill the purpose he has given me. Maybe, just maybe, God wants me, God wants us to keep on praying – and trust that God will be God – and that his love, and his mercy, and his strength will never forsake us. That's more than a maybe, I think -- don't you?

Sisters and brothers in Christ, uphold each other with your prayers. May the God who hears our prayers be honored by them. May the God, who blesses us use our prayers to challenge and encourage us to be blessings to others as we carry out the mission and ministry of our church. May the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, give us the strength to pray always and not lose heart. And may the God who did his will through the life, death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ, do his will through our lives as well. Amen.

