

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**October 16, 2016; the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings:** Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8.

### **Prayer Changes Us**

In the 1993 movie *Shadowlands*, Anthony Hopkins plays C. S. Lewis, who is struggling with the illness of his great love Joy, whom he marries while she is very sick with cancer and in the hospital.

At one point, Joy shows some improvement, and the priest in this story, Harry, says to Lewis, "...I know how hard you've been praying; and now God is answering your prayers."

C. S. Lewis: "That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless.

I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me."

Prayer changes us.

Remember what I've been saying, and believe with all my heart?

God always wants the best for us; that does not depend on what we do.

If that is true, why does what we do matter?

Why does nurturing our faith matter?

Why does prayer matter?

It seems that over the last few weeks, our readings, especially our Gospel readings, have invited consideration of faith, what it means to have faith, and how faith and action are connected.

Last Sunday, the focus was faith and gratitude, and today the focus is faith and prayer.

The parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow has led some, as Harry did, in the movie, to assume that if we pray hard enough God will respond.

The judge, who did not care about being just, eventually  
 granted the widow's request for justice...we don't  
 know exactly what that was about...but she was  
 probably in a dispute of some kind with  
 someone...the back story that Jesus  
 assumed his hearers would  
 understand as he told this  
 parable.

"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 not wear me  
 out..." -- by continually showing up at my  
 house!

In the story, she will not leave him alone.

Then Jesus makes the point, "...will not God grant justice to  
 his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he  
 delay long in helping them?"

If an unjust judge will grant the request of one who is  
 persistent, won't our God of peace of healing of  
 justice, grant our requests if we are persistent?

And Jesus says it will happen quickly.

And then Jesus wonders if faith will be found on earth  
 when the Son of Man comes---read, when God's reign  
 comes in its fullness.

And this whole parable and teaching started with Jesus  
 wanting to tell them/us about their/our need to pray  
 always and not lose heart.

And yet, haven't so many people lost heart after praying  
 with persistence and great faith for something or  
 someone and the healing didn't come and the  
 person died.

This is one of the most common reasons that people stop  
 going to church and say they don't believe in God...in  
 my experience.

And who can blame them if we set us the system in such  
 away...if we teach that prayer changes God.

Well, if prayer doesn't change God...what is the point of  
this parable?

God is granting justice and seeking justice in our world all  
the time, and we do believe that one day, the fullness  
of God's love for the world will be known...God's  
Kingdom come, God's reign on earth.

We who pray are joined with God in a spiritual  
way...connected to the fullness of God's love and  
God's desire for justice.

We may not see the fullness of God's love made manifest  
in our time or in specific ways in our lives...sometimes  
we do...but often we don't...and this is exactly why  
Jesus wanted his first followers, and wants us, to pray always and not lose  
heart...as if he knew there would be many occasions  
for us to lose heart.

As Kimberly Bracken Long states in *Feasting on the Word*:  
“...our prayers do not constitute so many unanswered  
pleas; rather, they are our participation in the coming  
reign of God.

By praying continually, and not giving up hope, we live in  
the surety that God has not abandoned this world. Living in hope, we work, in whatever  
ways we can, for the  
justice and the peace that is coming.”<sup>1</sup>

Prayer doesn't change God; it changes us.

Oliver Larry Yarbrough maintains that in order to  
understand how Luke “makes perseverance in prayer  
and not losing heart elements of faith,” we need to  
consider some verses from Luke not included  
in our readings for this year:

Luke 17:20-37, in which the Pharisees ask Jesus when  
the kingdom of God will come.

Jesus answers: “The kingdom of God is not coming with  
things that can be observed; nor will they say,

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol., 3*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Epub., Kimberly Bracken Long, “Pastoral Perspective,” Loc 7198 of 12899.

‘Look, here it is!’ or

‘There it is!’

For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among [or, within] you.”<sup>2</sup>

Taking all of this together, isn’t this a very different way of understanding the Second Coming and the coming of the reign of God in its fullness?

The kingdom of God is among and within us.

We have been created in God’s image...that Godseed within...we considered last Sunday.

Our prayers for peace, justice, healing, those prayers arise from the depths of us...the depths of our soul.

No one had to teach us to desire those things.

And is it not the Holy Spirit, as we hear in Romans, that prays within us with sighs too deep for words...even when we can’t pray or are not sure about prayer or what to pray for.

The Holy Spirit prays within us.

And what a difference it makes to how we live and what we choose to do with our resources, when we know, consider, be open to the idea, that God’s reign of peace and justice and healing is coming into being right now, through each of us and through our church...our faith community.

What a difference that makes ...rather than waiting for God to show up and fix everything...rather than waiting...to grab onto the gifts God has already given us ...grab on to the prayers that come from our hearts and let them be seen, help them to be seen in the world.

What if we thought about God being the persistent widow who never stops knocking at our door until we get up and act...act for justice?

Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wrote a book with a title so fitting for our discussion today:

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Oliver Larry Yarbrough, “Exegetical Perspective,” 7243 of 12899.

*Becoming The Answer To Our Prayers.*

In the introduction, quoting John Perkins from CCDA

(Christian Community Development Association),

“‘When you see someone who needs a handicap ramp,  
don’t go pray for a ramp!

Build them a ramp.’”

They go on to say, “When we pray to God asking, ‘Why  
don’t you do something?’ we hear a gentle whisper  
respond,

“‘I did do something.

I made you.’

Prayer is important.

Just as important is the call to become the answer  
to our prayers.”<sup>3</sup>

This could not be more true than when we pray for the  
refugees of our world.

I am so thankful and we are blessed to have

John Baumann, Director of the Virginia Refugee and  
Immigration Program, for Church World Service  
with us today.

I hope many of you will be able to join us for our Forum  
with John following the service in the parish hall...right  
where we have our fellowship time.

We pray for the village of Mzula each week.

And this is the time of year when we are invited renew our  
commitment to the children of that village by giving a  
check for \$80 to support a child through the  
Carpenter’s Kids program.

If you are new and would like to sponsor a child, you can  
write a check and put Carpenter’s Kids in the memo  
area.

We can’t do everything, but we can do something in  
response to the prayers of our hearts.

In our world of politics and structures, rules and  
regulations, laws, as the people of God, we are called  
to be persistent in our prayers...as our prayers  
help us to know what God is calling us to be about.

Our prayers also strengthen us to be God’s people in the  
world.

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<sup>3</sup> Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Becoming The Answer To Our Prayers: Prayer For Ordinary Radicals*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008, p. 11.

One final quotation, from *Becoming the Answer to our Prayers*:

“Now, we shouldn’t ever think that we are God, or  
that we are the hope of the world or the ones who  
move history....

But God lives in us and through us.

In fact, Scripture even says, ‘No one has ever seen God;  
but if we love one another, God lives in us’ (1 John  
4:12).

You are the only Jesus some people will ever see.

We get to become the body of Christ, to be people who  
remind the world of Jesus.

We are God’s body.

None of us is Christ alone, but all of us are Christ together. We are God’s body in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

I conclude with a prayer from the diocese specifically for  
our Fall Stewardship campaign, but in the context of  
this sermon, we can see that it is good for use  
anytime.

We will say this prayer in unison as the conclusion of today’s Prayers of the People. Let us pray,

*Loving and gracious God, in your abundance we abide, and with your generosity let us give.  
Make us like your Christ, and help us to walk in love as he did. Change us daily into the fragrant  
offering and sacrifice acceptable to you. Receive our gifts and prayers, in Jesus’ precious and  
holy name. Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.