



**First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ  
*Creating Community, Welcoming All***

429 Main Street ❖ P.O. Box 519 ❖ Ashfield MA 01330 ❖ 413.628.4470  
<http://www.ashfielducc.org> ❖ [uccashfield@gmail.com](mailto:uccashfield@gmail.com) ❖ [facebook.com/ashfielducc](https://www.facebook.com/ashfielducc)

**Rev. David Jones, Minister**

**Sermon      October 16, 2022      Rev. David Jones      “Prayers When It Comes to Justice”**

My Dad texted me the other day. My parents and I text and email often, so there wasn't anything out of the ordinary in this, and I might have decided to get to his message later in the day—except the message began urgently. The first word that popped up on my phone was “Help” with a big exclamation point! So of course, I opened it right away, and then was relieved as I started to read the rest of the message: “Help! My colleague wants to know why some of our prayers go unanswered.”

My relief was short-lived. This is a very hard question. It is a question we all have asked and will ask. I almost fired off a note to Bruce: “Help! My father's colleague wants to know why some of our prayers go unanswered.”

Luckily for me this week's scripture reading in the Gospel according to Luke happens to be about prayer. Scripture is one of our resources for difficult questions like this, it contains, after all, a millenia's worth of prayers that go both answered and unanswered. Scripture plucks this hard question from the air and brings it into the intimate experiences of our ancestors. It confronts us with the bald fact that God does not work quite the way many of us would like, or even the way many of us have been taught. It is not the case that every prayer will be answered, or at least it is not the case that every prayer will be answered in the way this question seems to imply. God and prayer are not exchanged like goods and currency in a marketplace.

When a prayer goes unanswered, we may feel profoundly alone. We may lose heart. We may stop praying. We may tell ourselves that, since God did not do as I asked, that God is not for me. We may become defiant and say, for all that I have seen in this life, for all the grim things that I or a loved one or a friend or a stranger have suffered, there is no God, or if there is, to hell with God. Since God has abandoned us, why should we not abandon God? Jesus himself asks that. That is a fair question to reach.

In the 1st century in Palestine, Jesus was addressing an oppressed people, a people suffering under the whims of a foreign power. His people lacked the power to determine for themselves how they would live. The inequality between them was growing, their recourse to justice was shrinking. Every year things got worse not better. The people's prayers were going unanswered. Yet Jesus teaches them neither to stop praying nor to pray harder or more fervently. Instead, Jesus teaches that the people need to pray always and need to not lose heart not because prayer changes the world or brings their oppression to an end—not because prayers are always answered in that kind of direct way, like here is my prayer, now give me what I've paid for. Jesus does not teach that.

So if prayer does not work that way, how does it work that we should pray always? Jesus shares a parable to illustrate what he means by prayer, and to show the power of praying day and night. As is often the case with parables, it is short on details. There are just two characters: an unjust judge, a judge who openly rejects God and disrespects the people he is supposed to serve; and, there is a widow, whose case comes before the judge. The unjust judge dismisses it. But the widow is persistent and tireless. She keeps on bothering the judge until finally the judge is worn down. The judge does not suddenly have a change of heart; the judge is not moved by the widow's courage, he is not morally transformed. He does not feel for her or respect her, he is not reformed in any way. But his will for *injustice* is broken by the widow's will *for* justice.

In this parable to illustrate our need to pray and to not lose heart, the word prayer doesn't appear. The widow is not said to pray for justice. We do not read about her getting justice because she prayed to God and God leapt into action. There isn't a scene where she whispers to God at sunset and then tucks herself into bed and wakes up to justice with the dawn. Rather she is characterized as someone who has cried out for justice "day and night," until the sway of injustice is broken by the real power of her cries. The way to have our hope or beliefs or our prayers fulfilled or answered when it comes to justice is not to rest on an idea, it is not to rest on a question. Rather, for freedom and for justice, we have to act in such a way that we make our idea real, in such a way that we create an answer where there has not been one, whoever or whatever the obstacles may be.

Throughout scripture, and in each of our lives, our experience with prayer will vary. Sometimes we will pray because maybe it *will* make the difference. Maybe it will be enough to speak certain precious words or to give name to an idea or hope that is dear to us. God does love and respond to us in all kinds of creative and novel ways. And we are ourselves creative beings. If we search, we often do find; maybe it is not that our prayer went unanswered, it just was answered in an unexpected way. Something we thought we needed was not what we needed after all, and this process of praying and especially sharing a prayer, putting it out there into the community, facilitates a discovery, opens new space for perspective.

But when it comes to prayers and justice—when it comes to the kind of prayer that Jesus is instructing us to do always—prayer is simply to not lose heart, like the widow in our parable. We pray not for God to do something for us, but for God to be our strength to do something for ourselves.

Prayer in the Old and New Testament is *not* always about God doing or fulfilling what was prayed for. It *is* always about 'not losing heart,' about remaining steadfast in our conviction for justice. We pray to remain faithful to God, not to test that God is faithful to us. Because God is not an all powerful man in the clouds, like a judge or boss. God is love, they are a creative will or spirit, they are a presence, who makes a promise through prophets and through the untiring cries of a widow that humanity can yet become equal on earth as in heaven. A faithful person prays to the God Who Is Love to keep themselves on the loving path of justice's promise, even in the face of all of this life's profound trouble and difficulty. When it comes to justice, we pray to not lose heart.

In this church we pray. We pray for change, and we pray to keep faith, and in our meeting with God, at this point of humility and uncertainty, at this point of powerlessness, we are bound to all who cry out. Our own cries bind us even more. Jesus does not want us to be like the powerful man who is lost and cruel, Jesus wants us to be like the marginalized woman in his parable. Jesus says that God's will resides there, God's hope and will for justice is there. And so in every instance, we should do this, we should pray always, because regardless of our intention or our expectation for any of the prayers we lift up, they have the effect of helping this community look out for one another. Looking out for one another, coming here ready to witness who is in pain or ill, who is afraid or alone, who is grieving, who is joyful, who is taking up a new challenge or beginning a new chapter—this allows us each to play our part in keeping each other from losing heart. Prayer happening in a communal setting like our sanctuary, whether spoken or silently felt, is a way to begin to become a bother to those who stand in the way of justice for us all.

Alleluia and amen.