

Preacher: And the Gospel lesson appointed for this Sunday is from the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge "who neither feared God nor had respect for people. "In that city was a widow, who kept coming to him "and saying, 'Judge, grant me justice against my opponent.' "For a while, the Judge refused, "but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God "nor respect for anybody, yet because this widow "keeps bothering me I will grant her justice, "so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" 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. "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, "will he find faith on the Earth?" This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Praise the Lord.

Preacher: The parable begins with Jesus-- With Luke's comment that Jesus told them a parable, so that they might always pray and not lose heart. And yet, the parable ends with a question. "And when the Son of Man comes, "will he not find faith on the Earth?" What is the parable about? It's about prayer, it seems. And we listen, because prayer is a problem for many of us. Is anybody listening to my prayer? Am I talking to God or am I only speaking to myself? Some form of autosuggestion? And the problem is not only that we are uncertain about prayer, but I think we have the good sense to know that when we pray, as in few other activities of faith, we are really putting our faith on the line when we pray. Is there a God? And if there is a God, is it a God who listens, who hears, who responds? These are frightening questions. Luke says Jesus told this parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow in order that we might pray always and not lose heart. And throughout Luke, there's a lot of talk about prayer, which suggests prayer is not just a problem for modern people. Maybe prayer is always a problem for anybody who claims to believe in a God who hears and who acts. Prayer raises difficult, threatening questions. Is there a God who hears? Is there a God who cares? And maybe the problem beneath our problems with prayer is the one Jesus addresses. We just lose heart. If we really believed in the power of prayer, I suppose we would be-- If we were truly convinced that prayer changes things, we would be praying all the time; you couldn't stop us from praying. But maybe the problem is we just lose heart. And so Jesus tells a funny story about a disgusting judge. He is a sleazy jurist, probably put into his position through some political shenanigans. And this poor widow, she is without protection; she is without any power. What hope does she have before this judge's bench? She has one thing; she has the ability to pester. Leaving messages on his answering machine, constantly banging on his door, giving him no peace, she is persistent. Finally this judge says to himself, "Look, I don't fear God and I could care less "about the voters, but I will give this woman "what she wants just to get her out of my hair." How does this story keep us praying without losing heart? Maybe Jesus tells us this story because he wants us to understand that even though the world may look broken and unjust and unresponsive, if you just keep at it, things will work out, you know? If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. But if that were the parable's point, this wouldn't be, "Pray always and don't lose heart," but merely, "Keep at it, be persistent, "and things will eventually work out for the best." Go ahead, harass God until you get what you want. No, Luke

says Jesus told us this parable in order that we might pray always without ceasing and not lose heart. Maybe it's not a story about the potential rewards of persistent prayer. Maybe it's not even a parable about prayer. Tom Long says he thinks this is a parable about the nature of God, about the character of God. In this parable, we meet a judge and we're told something about his character. He doesn't fear God and he cares nothing for other people. But he is a judge who, it is revealed through his actions, he does seem to care about getting a good night's sleep. He does care about being left alone. And so he responds on the basis of who he is. You might not particularly care for who he is, but at least he acts consistently with who he is. If this sleazy judge will open up his hand to those who seek justice, if he opens up to this widow for all the wrong reasons, how much more so will God be open to you, for all the right reasons? Today I want you to think about prayer, but not as asking God for things, but rather prayer as asking God to be God. Prayer is the persistent day-in day-out attempt to let God go ahead and be God. When you were a little child and you suffered some injustice or you received some pain, what did your mother say? She attempted to comfort you. And she would say something like, "There there now, it's all right." What did she mean when she said that? She surely did not mean that your pain was inconsequential. That wouldn't have made sense; obviously your pain was real. That was why she was attempting to comfort you. She did not mean that everything was going to immediately be all right in that moment. She surely knows enough about life to know that things don't always work out right. Maybe what she was saying was that finally, ultimately, though you had only lived in the world, say, four or five years, she had learned from her life that finally, ultimately, in the larger picture, the world really is structured in such a way that all shall be well; pain doesn't last forever. Even the worse setbacks of life are integrated into life and you go on. In other words, when she said, "There there now, "everything is going to be all right," she was making a kind of statement of faith about the ultimate character of the world. This parable is a story. And it's not so much a story about the useful technique of using prayer to get what you want. I think it's a story about the character of God, the trustworthiness of God. The judge cares neither for God nor the widow, but God cares. And I love those wonderful moments in scripture, often in the Old Testament, where people dare to call God to be God. I think of a lot of the prayers of Moses, where Moses is out on the Exodus and things are bad and he says to the people of Israel, "Let me go up on the mountain; I'll talk to him." And Moses gets up there and he says to God, "Didn't you say when you brought us out of slavery, "don't you remember that earlier you had said, remember?" These prayers are not just pestering God, but they are in a way defending God's good name. They are saying in their speeches to God, "I believe you are a righteous God, "whose will is ever for the good of your children." A few Sundays ago, we prayed a prayer. It was a Psalm, actually; many of the Psalms are prayers. And it was Psalm 137, which John Wesley said, upon reading it, "There are some Psalms "that just aren't fit for Christian ears." But it's that Psalm which begins well enough about by the waters of Babylon we hung up our harps and they said, "Sing us one of those songs out of Zion," and we said, "We're not gonna sing, "because we're Jews in exile," and then it says, "Babylon, you avenger, happy are those who would take "your little ones and dash their heads against rocks." And sure enough, just as I predicted, some attentive person came out and said, "I don't think that was appropriate "to pray in a service of Christian worship." I noted to the person, "You notice it doesn't say "we ought to go out and bash somebody's head against a rock. "The Psalm is sort of saying, "'God, if you are just and you believed "in setting things right, you would go out "and do to their children what they did to our children.' "It's saying, 'God, go ahead and be just, "the way we would like you to be just.'" That response didn't seem to help the person who was raising the question, but-- The main function of prayer is to let God be God. Later in this service, we're gonna pray

the Lord's Prayer. How does it begin? "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." See, the Lord's Prayer spends most of the Lord's Prayer saying things about God, before it ever gets around to asking for anything like bread or forgiveness of our trespasses. We wouldn't bother God about bread, or about our sin, if it were not for our prior abiding conviction that we are God's creatures and that our creator cares. In praying, we show risky, courageous confidence that God does care and hear and act. When you pray for something as mundane as daily bread, you're making a rather amazing statement about faith in the goodness of God. Each year, on the first Sunday of Lent, it has been our custom to pray something called The Great Litany. And it's chanted between the choir and the congregation. And it's a long prayer, comes out of the Anglican tradition. It's one of the longest prayers in the church. It takes about 15 minutes to pray it. And by the time we've finished praying it, we have prayed for sailors and we've prayed for people on journeys, for pregnant women, for women who would like to be pregnant; we have prayed for bread, young children, people with various kinds of illnesses. And a student said one year, after we had prayed this prayer, at the end of the service, and I said, "How'd you like that long prayer "we prayed, The Great Litany?" And he said, "I just kept standing there, thinking, "'It's amazing that God cares about all this, isn't it?'" And that's a good-- I mean, what kind of God have we got that would get involved in stuff like pregnancy and pain and people alone and traveling? Prayer is not primarily asking God to do things, even things so basic as bread. Rather, prayer is a courageous determination to let God be who God is. People say, "I always get answers to my prayer." But if you've done much praying, you know that a lot of the answers you get to prayer are, "No." And in those times, we're left with a mystery of why doesn't God want for us what we want for us? And why is God different from the way we would want God to be? Reynolds Price, Duke writer, in his book, *A Whole New Life*, tells of when he was in the very depths of his illness with cancer. He one night, in a tortured night, encountered Christ in a vision, in a dream, and in this dream he says he is there in the Holy Land and Christ is there and Christ turns around and addresses him. And he looks at him and he says, "My son, your sin is forgiven." Ever typical of Reynolds, he replies to Jesus, "Wait a minute, who said I was worried about my sin?" "The main thing is, am I going to be healed?" And he said the Christ looks aggravated at that point and said, "Yeah, and that too," and walks off. (laughter) And so we say in daily speech, we'll say things like, "Take heart," and we mean by that take courage. Go ahead and take courage. Sometimes it's tough to pray because we lack the guts to risk an encounter with the true God and all of God's free, stunning, untamed-ness. And yet, that's prayer; that's why you're here this morning. And you might think of every act of worship we do this morning as just an attempt to be with God and to let God be God. How is it possible to pray always, I mean to pray constantly? I think that's only possible because of the nature of God and our relationship. I know someone, for instance, who calls her mom nearly every night. Now, you're saying to yourself, "She must really be dependent on her old lady," or, "That mother ought to get out of her daughter's life," or, "That girl needs to learn to call her parents "only when she's low on cash or for important things." But, when I asked this sophomore, "Why do you call your mother every night?" She replied, "Well, my mom is the only person I know "who actually cares about what kind of day I've had. "And it's really wonderful to know throughout the day "that there's someone, somewhere, who actually cares." And that is why we keep praying. And that is why we don't lose heart. We persist, not to get things out of God. But we keep at it, and you keep coming back, Sunday after Sunday, and we keep singing, and we keep praying, and we keep praising, out of a determination to be with the true and the living God. As we move in the service of worship, we reach a crescendo this Sunday, called the Prayer of Thanksgiving. And you may note in that Prayer of Thanksgiving, we start with Genesis and work our way through the whole Bible. And

we say that God created the world and we say that God sent the Prophets and we say that in the fullness of time, Jesus was sent, and then God gave us bread, and you know, we spend the whole prayer, before we get around toward the end, to ask God for anything. And then when we ask God for something, we ask God for something like The Holy Spirit. We ask God to go ahead and be God. And that is why we keep at prayer. And that is why we never lose heart. Amen.