

## **Forgiveness: Persistence, Perseverance and Praying without Ceasing**

Luke 18:1-8

March 16, 2014

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Will you pray with me? *Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us....spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us, melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on us...*

*Then he told them this parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart... and **not lose heart***

It wasn't as if she had a strict pattern to every day. She didn't do the same thing every morning, not an afternoon routine, no particular bedtime ritual. But she did spend some portion of every day breathing deeply or consciously petitioning or reciting those powerful words from the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

And yet, for nineteen years, it seemed as if forgiveness simply would not come. Even as her prayers rose up asking for forgiveness to enter, her conscious mind registered that her heart remained broken and hardened. It was too much what he had done, she just couldn't find it within her to let it go.

*In a certain city, there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared anything for people; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.' For a while he refused; but afterward, he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor care anything for people, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'*

*And Jesus said, 'hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate the faithful, who cry to Her day and night?'*

And then one day, as she would later write in her blog, she awoke to the normalness of her life. But when she went to breathe and ask for God to help her forgive and let go, she realized it had already happened. As she told it, it was as if she had a screen over her face so that she had spent the last nineteen years

viewing the world through his abuse of her. She had spent the last nineteen years with her visage distorted by the screen, so that others had come to see her through it, too. She had spent the last nineteen years with a both hardened and broken heart.

But she would later tell her friends, that day, she realized that her prayers, her breathing, her deep desire to release the screen had gradually been answered. She realized that day that the screen and its distortions had been crumbling slowly. She realized her heart was healing and somehow softening.

She would write that nothing had been forgotten, nothing would ever be glossed over. She would never blame herself or anyone who had been victimized by another. This was not a forgive-and-forget experience. She would always bear the marks—in her body and soul. This was not cheap grace—he would always bear the weight of seeking to annihilate that of God in another. It was not the kind of forgiveness that centuries of bad theology had preached. She would never participate in that kind of lies and re-abuse. No, she would report, it was more like a kind of liberation, like she'd read in the Scriptures. She had prayed without ceasing and had been given her heart back.

Lent marks Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem. It is the story of deep community and healing. It is the story of prayer and preparation. It is the story of learning how to confront the powers and principalities that seek to oppress and deal death. It is the story of, in the face of great fear, choosing to take the first step and continue "on the way," even when it might mean the Empire seeks to crucify you. It is the story of doing all of this because you know Love is always stronger than death and that resurrection accompanies every crucifixion, even when we don't know how or when.

As Don preached about last week, we are invited to accompany Jesus' on his journey toward Jerusalem. And we are invited, during Lent, to reflect upon and practice those things that allow us to make the journey and to move toward shifting or letting go those things which block us.

One of the most powerful pieces of preparation—for our journey in life and especially when we face into the possibilities of our own deaths—is that of forgiveness.

As I stand, a week and a half into Lent, I knew I wanted to share the story of the woman I spoke of earlier. I have been carrying her story with me for close to twenty years, since I first read it. I think it speaks to me so much because I am a clinger, a controller, a sometimes driven person. I am pretty well convinced that if I were Queen of the Universe—really for a day or two, we could take care of a lot of what ails us. I like decisive, fast, linear and clear.

And yet God continues to find ways—both subtle and superlative—to slow me down, to help me stay open and vulnerable.

I don't know if Jesus was a clinger or a controller. I think maybe he might have had a bit of that. I see him struggling in the wilderness as Satan seeks to tempt him in the passage we read for last week. My guess is it wouldn't have been much of a temptation if being strong, powerful and decisive weren't hooks for him.

But he chose, at each moment, to put his trust and love in God. And he chose to put his trust in God's time and timing.

That is what the woman from the story this morning modeled for me. Her body had been broken, her heart fractured and hardened by betrayal and abuse. But she knew that regaining her power, claiming her heart, meant letting go of the screen behind which she was imprisoned. But she knew she couldn't do it alone and she knew she couldn't do it lightly and quickly. She had to pray without ceasing. She had to trust that God's time would be ripe.

I know I've told you this story before, but it speaks to me of what this community is and what it has been for me. I came to you almost eleven years ago, recently from a betrayal that had shaken my body and soul, and that had triggered the memory and devastation of a past violation. And you held me as I sought to pray without ceasing—which for me comes mostly through singing. You prayed with me and slowly acted as God's hands as you coaxed me to lower the screen.

As I've talked with many of you, I know the faithfulness of this community has worked similar sacred healing on you...

Our Scripture writer says that Jesus told them the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent woman so that they would know to pray without ceasing and not lose heart.

One of the most dangerous parts, for me, about not being able to forgive, is that you can lose your heart. But even if it takes a long time, sometimes decades of perseverance of asking for the ability to let go, even if it doesn't come at that moment or quickly, forgiveness can restore our own hearts and bodies and souls.

And so I ask that you help be my community of accountability as my clinging self seeks to let go. As my controlling self seeks to follow God's time. And my prayer is that God will empower us to support one another to lower the screens and, perhaps, one day, recognize that they're already gone.

Amen.

Order of Service:

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude

Gathering Song: NCH #742 (Please sing as a round)

A few moments of silence

Prayer of Invocation

Unison Prayer of Confession:

Loosen My Grip by Ted Loder in *Guerillas of Grace*

O God, it is hard for me to let go,  
    most times,  
and the squeeze I exert  
    garbles me and gnarls others.  
So, loosen my grip a bit  
    on the good times,  
        on the moments of sunlight and star shine and joy,  
that the thousand graces they scatter as they pass  
    may nurture growth in me  
        rather than turn to brittle memories.

Loosen my grip  
    on those grudges and grievances  
        I hold so closely,  
that I may risk exposing myself  
    to the spirit of forgiving and forgiveness  
        that changes things and resurrects dreams and courage.

Loose my grip  
    on my fears  
that I may be released a little into humility  
    and into an acceptance of my humanity.

Loosen my grip  
    on myself  
that I may experience the freedom of a fool  
    who knows that to believe  
        is to see kingdoms, find power, sense glory;  
to reach out  
    is to know myself held;  
to laugh at myself  
    is to be in on the joke of your grace;  
to attend to each moment

is to hear the faint melody of eternity;  
to dare love  
is to smell the wild flowers of heaven.

Loosen my grip  
on my ways and words,  
on my fears and fretfulness  
that letting go  
into the depths of silence  
and my own uncharted longings,  
I may find myself held by you  
and linked anew to all life  
in this wild and wondrous world  
you love so much,  
so I may take to heart  
that you have taken me to heart.

Words of Assurance—There is a Balm in Gilead NCH #553

Passing of the Peace

Time with Children

The Word Read: Luke 18:1-8

The Word Preached **Forgiveness: Persistence, Perseverance and Praying without Ceasing**

Hymn: Precious Lord, Take My Hand NCH #472

Prayers of the Community

Offering Invitation

Offertory—Solo by Sarah Kuhnen

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Hymn: Amazing Grace NCH #547

Benediction

Postlude