

Third Sunday of Easter (May 8, 2011)

**Big Questions:**

“How Can I Keep the Faith When Prayers Aren’t Answered?”

Text: [Luke 18:1-8](#), [I Samuel 1:1-27](#)

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My best friend in ministry is a very smart guy with a Ph.D. from Princeton. One day some parents brought their young son to see him with a question they couldn’t answer. My friend took the boy into his office, listened to his question, and gave what he thought was a pretty good answer. Then, as the family walked out the door, he heard the little guy say, “He doesn’t know the answer, either.”

We’ve all been there. When we invited you to share your big questions, many of them were questions for which there are no quick, easy, 30-second news bite answers. Questions like that.

- How do we keep conscious contact with God?
- How can two Christians pray about the same thing and get two different answers, each believing God was speaking to them?
- With all the promises and assurances of Jesus’ love for us and his constant companionship, why are we still so anxious?
- Dear Jesus, how can I put my worldly needs aside and totally rely on You?
- Why are we humans so fearful? Why is it so hard for us to trust?
- How do we know that God is really there?
- How can we maintain our faith, when we pray and pray for the same thing and God doesn’t answer our prayers?
- One person simply wrote: “God?”

The biblical way of responding to those questions is not to come up with a “five keys to a successful spiritual life,” but to tell a story. So, on this Mother’s Day, let’s look at the stories of two faithful and feisty women in scripture. The first woman is Hannah. You’ll find her story in [I Samuel Chapter 1](#), on page 213 in the pew bible.

A man named Elkanah had two wives. Peninnah (not to be confused with Panera) had several sons and daughters, but Hannah (not to be confused with Montana) had none. The problem got worse because Elkanah kept giving Hannah double the provisions he gave to Peninnah. This really ticked off Peninnah. She took it out on Hannah, and Hannah became so depressed that she couldn’t eat.

Elkanah's attempt to be a helpful husband is in verse eight. **"Elkanah said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?'"**

Note to husbands: Don't try this at home. Hannah did not find that to be very helpful. As women who have to put up with men like that often do, she turned to prayer in verse 10. **"She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly."**

Along comes Eli, the Temple priest, who had about the same level of emotional sensitivity as Elkanah. Look at verse 13. **"Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.'"**

Really, you can't make this stuff up! Hannah replies in verse 15: **"No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."**

Eli finally catches on and says, **"Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."** Finally, in verse 20, we read: **"In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the LORD.'"**

The second woman is the nameless widow in the parable we just read, the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge.

The men don't come off any better in this story than they did in the other one, but hang in there, guys. We get our day in June. Let's be clear that Jesus is not saying that God is anything like an unjust, hard-hearted, disrespectful judge. Exactly the opposite.

This is a "how much more" parable. Jesus is saying that if an unjust, hard-hearted, insensitive judge will finally give justice to this woman because of her persistence, then how much more will God **"grant justice to his chosen ones who call on him day and night."**

Luke announced the purpose of the story in the first verse: **"Then Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart."** He ends the parable with a question hanging in the air: **"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"** The

question is not about the faithfulness of God, but about our faithful persistence in prayer.

So, what can these women teach us about staying in contact with God? What can we learn from them that will help us keep the faith when seems that our prayers aren't answered?

Hannah teaches us that real prayer – the kind of prayer that connects us with God – is not easy. It goes into the deepest places in our souls.

Did you catch it? Hannah was **“deeply distressed and wept bitterly ... Her lips moved, but her voice was not heard.”** Her prayers were too deep for words. It's what St. Paul was talking about when he said that when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit **“intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”** (Romans 8:26)

That is, after all, the way Jesus prayed in the garden. It's the way Jacob wrestled with God in the wilderness. It's the way Moses prayed on the mountain. It's the way the psalms reverberate with soul-level joy and with gut-level pain.

Prayer is not sending off a gift list to a celestial Santa Claus and then being disappointed if we don't get everything we ask for. Prayer is opening the deepest parts of our lives – our greatest joys and our deepest sorrows – to the invasive presence and power of the love and grace of God and allowing God to use us as God's gift to a broken, love-starved world. It's not a magic trick to get God to do what we want; it's the process by which we allow God to do what God wants in and through our lives and in and through the lives of others.

If Hannah teaches us that prayer is not easy, the widow teaches us that real prayer opens the way for God's justice to be done in and through our lives. It's what Jesus meant when he taught us to pray that God's kingdom will come and God's will be done in and through us, on earth, as it is in heaven.

“Justice” is a tricky word right now. The President used it Sunday night. He said, “Justice was done.” And I guess it was, at least in the way the world understands justice. The problem is that the biblical understanding of justice is much broader and deeper than just getting back at the people who have hurt us. It goes beyond retribution or vengeance against those who have done evil.

In the Bible, justice is about everyone getting what everyone deserves through the universal fairness and love of God. It means bringing everyone into right relationship with God's vision for this world.

It's no coincidence that the key character in the parable is a widow. In scripture, widows and orphans are the standard description of those who are poor, helpless, disenfranchised, without position or power, excluded from the prevailing power structures around them. The widow's persistent plea for justice means that biblical justice is measured more by how things work for the powerless than by how things work for the powerful; it's determined more by what happens to folks on the bottom than what happens to folks at the top.

It's what another mother named Mary meant when she sang:

**My soul magnifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant ...  
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:47-53)**

That's what this helpless widow was pleading for. And that, Jesus says, is that God intends to give. The question is not about God's intention to make things right; the question is whether we will be faithful in hanging in there with God's way, God's rule, God's will revealed in Jesus until God's Kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. The question is whether we will allow God's justice to be done through us.

Both these women model a life of feisty, faithful kind of prayer that hangs in there with patient persistence, daring to believe that ultimately God's gracious will, saving purpose, God's justice will be accomplished in this world and in the lives of the people for whom we pray.

The good news is that these women are not just in the Bible. They are also present among us now.

I had a conversation this week with a woman who I've known for nearly 20 years now. Almost nothing about their children has turned out the way they might have hoped. It's been one struggle after another. She said I could share what she has learned, namely, that all she can do is love them, pray for them, continue to trust God to accomplish God's good

purpose for their lives, and let them go. That's the kind of faithful, persistence Jesus is describing in this parable.

I've invited two other women to share with us this morning. Sherlyn Burnham-Kuehn and Kim Foss will come to join me now. [You can see or hear their responses at <http://hydeparkumc.org/worship/sermons/sermon-archive/>]

Sherlyn, you shared a beautiful story with me about the persistence with which your mother prayed for you. How about sharing that with us? [Sherlyn]

Kim, you had your own experience of the influence of prayer as you were growing up. [Kim]

What are some ways you can identify with these biblical women? [Sherlyn and Kim]

What role has the church played in your faith? What difference does it make for you to be in community with other disciples? [Kim and Sherlyn]

Sherlyn, I think there's some Hannah-like news you want to share with us today. [Sherlyn pregnancy announcement]

Luke said that the purpose of the parable was for us to learn to pray always so that we might never lose heart. Jesus hangs the question out in front of us, "When the Son of Man comes will he find faith upon the earth?" Will he find persistent faith in us?