



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – January 18, 2009

How Does God Hear?

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## Philippians 4:6

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

## Luke 18:1-8

*<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"<sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

There was once a little girl who had an umbrella she dearly loved. This umbrella was yellow and had a handle shaped like a duck's head. One day it was raining outside. As the little girl and her mother were preparing to leave the house they looked for this favorite umbrella and couldn't find it anywhere. The little girl was sad that this beloved possession was missing. She suggested to her mother that they pray and ask God to help them locate the umbrella. The mother hesitated. While she taught her daughter to pray she wasn't sure if the missing umbrella was worthy of God's attention and she worried the umbrella would never turn up thus impugning the young child's ability to believe God cares about our prayers and petitions. But something in her just couldn't tell her daughter not to pray about finding the missing umbrella. So they asked God to help them find it. Over time the little girl talked about the umbrella less and less but every once in a while she'd tell her mother she wanted to ask God to help them find the umbrella. Now by this time the mother was

sure the umbrella was no where in the house to be found but she let her daughter pray. Then one day as the weather grew colder the mother was cleaning out a closet gathering all the winter coats together – when what should she discover but the yellow umbrella. It had become lodged in the back of the closet among all the clothes that had been put away for the summer. Her daughter's prayers had been answered.

Now which character in the story are you more like – the mother or the daughter? As you think about bringing prayers for yourself or others to God are you concerned that God is too busy for them, or God might not listen or answer? Or are you more like the little girl, do you bring God all your concerns with a quiet confidence that even though you don't understand the process you know that God will hear and act in some way, some time to make things right?

Our Gospel lesson today is a parable Jesus told his disciples about the persistent widow. There are two characters in this parable: the judge who Jesus described as a man who had no respect for God or for people and the widow. Jesus doesn't tell us what the legal case was about but most likely it concerned her dead husband's estate. Under the Jewish law of the time she was unable to inherit her husband's estate. At his death it passed directly to their sons or her brothers in law. She was, however, allowed to live off of it for the rest of her life. That is, unless, her family or her husband's family were unscrupulous and were trying to cheat her out of it. Since she comes to the judge alone it is a good bet that this is what is happening. But apparently the judge is not very sympathetic to her because Jesus says she "kept coming to him." In fact – she kept coming at him so often sort of like a boxer continually coming after his opponent that in order to get rid of her and perhaps save face he finally granted her request.

At the beginning of this story Luke tells us that Jesus told the disciples this story to remind them of their need to pray always and not lose heart. At the end of the story he reminds them that if the unjust judge could

finally grant justice to the widow, how much more does God, with impeccable and perfect character, desire to do this for them who cry to him day and night. So who in this gospel lesson reminds you of your approach to petition and intercession? Are you more like the widow? She demanded that the judge do the judge's job and dispense justice? Do you demand and believe that God will let justice roll down as well – that God be, well, God? Are you like the widow dogging God with your prayers asking for justice for yourself and others, that things be made right, that things be put as they should be or are you more like the disciples, easily distracted from your prayers – maybe not believing that justice will or can be done. Do you give up easily on your prayers? Do you lose heart or lack courage in your prayers?

This whole idea of asking God for things either for ourselves or for others does seem to be fraught with peril from the human perspective. How does God hear our prayers? Is God really listening? Does God care if I find a parking space? How do I not treat God as a fairy Godmother deigning to grant my every wish? How do I know if God has really answered my prayers? Does God answer every prayer? These questions and more can cloud our prayer life zapping it of the power that God intended in allowing us this personal access to the Almighty.

And the interesting thing is that the Bible really never answers these questions. Instead we're told "Ask and it shall be given to you. Seek and you will find." Or we're told God is pleased to grant us the desires of our heart or Jesus teaches the disciples to pray for their daily bread. Or Jesus tells an amusing story about a widow pestering an unjust judge. Paul tells us in today's epistle not to worry about anything but instead to let all your requests be made known to God. We're simply told to do it – to pray – to ask God for things. The Bible doesn't seem to be concerned about how the rest of it happens. Our job is to ask. And then to live like we believe God is working in the world and more specifically in the things we have asked of him. Theologian Karl Barth said that "to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

But the Bible's seeming non concern with explaining God's side of intercessory and petitionary prayer hasn't stopped theologians and ministers from

speculating on it. Bishop Michael Ramsay says "the basic meaning of intercession isn't pleading with God but standing in God's presence on behalf of another – interceding isn't bargaining with Gods, it's not pulling the arm of a one armed bandit – but standing in the presence of God, simply being there." And I would add, simply being there day after day after day. John Austin Baker, the former Bishop of Salisbury wrote in his book *The Foolishness of God*: "When we pray for others (and ourselves) we shall see that by far the most important requirement is inner calmness and tranquility. We are not engaged in creating or producing anything, but in becoming aware of what is already the fact, namely that God is immediately and intimately present both to ourselves and to the one for whom we are praying. Our task is to hold the awareness in the still centre of our being, to unite our love for them with God's love, in the quiet but total confidence that he will use our love to help bring about the good in them (and in us) which we desire."

Sometimes stories are the best way to understand how God works. In the history of the modern church no one stands out as a person who did not lose heart in prayer more than George Muller. Muller was a pastor in Bristol, England who is best known for his care for orphans. As the orphanages had needs Rev. Muller would pray asking God to take care of the needs and God did. For example, one day it was time for breakfast at the orphanage called Ashley Downs but there was no food. Muller said to some guests visiting the home, "Come and see what God will do." In the dining room, long tables were set with empty plates and mugs. Not only was there no food in the kitchen, but there was no money in the home's account. Muller prayed, "Dear Father, we thank Thee for what Thou art going to give us to eat." Immediately, they heard a knock at the door. When they opened it, there stood the local baker. "Mr. Muller," he said, "I couldn't sleep last night. Somehow I felt you had no bread for breakfast, so I got up at 2 am and baked fresh bread. Here it is." Muller thanked him and gave praise to God. Soon, a second knock was heard. It was the milkman. His cart had broken down in front of the orphanage. He said he would like to give the children the milk so he could empty the cart and repair it.

And a story of my own. About 20 years ago I was serving in a church in Lexington, Massachusetts. The church sent me to Quito, Ecuador to attend a

conference. The night before I was to leave the Boston area had a snowstorm. I got to Logan Airport on time but, of course, my flight to Miami was delayed meaning that I could very possibly miss my connection on an Ecuadorian airlines to Quito. Not being a very experienced traveler at that point I wasn't sure what I was going to do when I found myself stuck in Miami or how I would contact my hosts in Quito. So I prayed and worried and fretted all the way to Miami. When I got off the flight in Miami standing at the jet way door was a Hispanic man in a yellow sweater saying "Ecuadoriana, Por Cristo" over and over again to the passengers who were disembarking. Now my Spanish isn't that good but I knew enough to know he was saying the name of my airline and "For Christ." So, I thought – well I can't go wrong if I follow his group. So I stayed by the man in the yellow sweater and followed him and his group as they ran through the Miami airport. When I got to the Ecuadoriana counter I discovered that my flight to Quito had been held because of this group of people who had been traveling with me on my flight from Boston. It turns out that often a group of doctors and nurses from Boston would travel to Guayaquil, Ecuador to work in the clinics there. They were such heroes in Ecuador that anything would be done for them including holding their flight. I just happened to be able to ride their tail wind. But the thing is God knew those people were on the flight. God knew everything would be OK and that I would not be stranded in Miami and, the thing is, even if I had been stranded in Miami – everything would have been OK, too. God would have answered my prayers and made the situation right in some other way. All that fretting and worrying was for nothing.

The Lord's Prayer is a model prayer of petition and intercession. When we pray "give us this day our daily bread" we are not just asking God for food but asking God for all that we need to get through each individual day in a right and just way – to live each day as the way days should be lived. Dallas Willard in his book *The Divine Conspiracy* says of this prayer, "this request embodies that confidence in our Father that relieves us from all anxiety. The emphasis is on provision today of what we need for today. This is because God is always present today, no matter which day it is. His reign is the Eternal Now. So, we do not ask him to provide today what we will need for tomorrow. To have it in hand today does not

guarantee that we will have it tomorrow when we need it. Today I have God and God has the provisions. Tomorrow it will be the same. So I simply ask today for what I need for today or ask now for what I need now."

So what kind of prayer are you – what does God hear when you pray? Are you like the little girl who knows that nothing is too small or insignificant for God to hear about? Are you the mom who knows intellectually that God hears and answers prayer but is still worried that his reputation might suffer if the umbrella is never found? Are you the widow demanding that God be God in every circumstance? Are you George Muller – who prays knowing without a doubt that God will provide miraculously everything his orphans need for that day? Or are you like me believing that God cares about making things come out right but still frets and worries about them anyway. My guess is that we are all these kinds of prayers – some times doubters, some times worriers and some times confident, courageous children convinced of the good gifts of the father.

Dr. Willard ends his chapter on the Lord's Prayer by saying, "When we accept and practice Jesus' teaching on prayer, however, we are entirely freed from concerns about the future. You can easily imagine what a marvelously transforming effect this has on our life and our relationships with others." So in the words of Walter Breuggeman, "Pray and leave the answers in God's hands." Or in the words of Jesus, "pray always and don't lose heart." **Amen.**