

Beating a Path to the Door

Luke 18:1-8

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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I'm going to assume many of you here today have cable TV provided by Comcast. Do you enjoy, as I do, those times when you are having problems with your cable and you have to try to arrange for service?

We have at our house one TV that has digital cable and high definition. It works a lot of the time, but often, when we are watching one of the high definition channels the picture will start to break up to the point that you really can't watch it and we have to switch to a regular channel.

We've been having this problem and trying to get it resolved since... January. That's right, since January I've been periodically calling Comcast and telling them about my problem. They will then schedule someone to come out—let's say between 2 and 4 on a Thursday afternoon. So the person shows up Friday morning about 8:00.

I explain the situation. He looks around. Using some instrument he checks various outlets. He goes outside and checks the box out there. He possibly makes some minor adjustment or simply says that he can't find anything wrong. I think we have had 6 different people out to do this over the last nine months. It always involves taking at least a half day off work.

One time a few months ago two guys came out. They seemed to know what they were doing. They switched some cables around, worked pretty hard. At some point while they were working they knocked out my internet connection. One of the workers then left, and the other guy stayed and worked on my internet for over an hour trying to restore the connection. Forget about fixing the TV at this point.

He finally came to me and said, *I'm sorry, I can't figure out what happened to your internet.* And he was leaving. I started to lose my cool. I think I was apoplectic—if I'm right about what that word means.

I said, *So, not only did you not fix my TV problem, you also cut off my internet access. So you came and now I am actually worse off than before you came.* He had nothing to say. He was leaving. I followed him to the door: *How about you come back tomorrow and not fix my TV and knock out my electricity. And then next week you could come back and not fix my TV and cut off my running water.*

I'm not usually the kind of person who makes angry phone calls and asks to speak to the manager and that type of thing, but I spent the next hour doing that with Comcast. I was mad. I was refusing to let it go. I was talking to managers right and left.

I finally was able to get the job order number and the phone number to a company called C-COR, which is a company that Comcast subcontracts with to provide installations and repairs. The guys that had come out to my house that day actually worked for C-COR.

So I ended up talking to a guy named David Brown, who is the supervisor there. And David Brown actually came out to my house that afternoon. And made the guy who had been there earlier and left meet him there. It was a little awkward.

They restored my internet connection, and then David Brown crawled through my attic and looked at the cable up there. He decided that the cable in my attic needs to be replaced and gave me his card, with his office phone number and cell phone number and email address and said that he'd have someone come out the following week and replace that cable.

I loved David Brown at that point—really, I had strong feelings for him. I actually had a real person I could contact with my problem who was going to help me.

That was April. No one has ever come out to replace the cable.

I still call and email David Brown about once a month, just for old times' sake. He always tells me that he'll have someone come out the next day to replace that cable. No one ever comes. And to be honest, I don't even expect anyone to come anymore.

But because I know my Bible and I know the story Jesus told in Luke 18, I keep expecting that one day David Brown, supervisor at C-COR (cell phone number: xxx-xxxx) will finally sigh and say: *Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this man keeps bothering me, I will grant him justice, so that he may not wear me out by continually calling.*

And Jesus will say, *If the people at Comcast will finally respond to your cries for help, how much more will God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night.*

It's called an argument from the lesser to the greater. The point is that if even Comcast, if even some person who is too busy or too lazy or just doesn't care will finally respond to your persistence, how much more will God who loves you respond to you.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus told his disciples this parable because they were having problems with prayer. I think if we're honest we all have problems with prayer from time to time. Jesus' disciples even were having problems with prayer. That's why Jesus told them this parable.

We have many questions and issues and problems about prayer. Mainly we wonder if prayer is really heard by God. So many of our prayers seem unanswered. Thomas Long puts it this way: We pray for health, but there is still dark spot on the x-ray. We pray for peace, but the troops aren't home and the war still goes on. We pray for our children, but they still get into trouble.

We have problems with prayer, but when we go all the way down, our deepest problem with prayer may be that we lose heart. We just lose heart. We lose confidence and trust and hope that our prayers will be heard and answered. We lose heart. And Jesus told them a parable that they might pray always and not lose heart.

The story that Jesus told his disciples was about a terrible judge. This judge didn't care about people. He's the kind of

corrupt judge who makes a mockery out the title “Your Honor.”

Unfortunately, appearing in his courtroom was a poor widow who needed justice but had nothing. She had absolutely nothing. She had no money, she had no husband, she had no standing, she had no power, she had no resources, she had nothing.

She was so insignificant, she probably couldn't have gotten justice in a good courtroom with a good judge, but here she was in the courtroom of the worst judge in the land.

Now she didn't exactly have nothing. She did have one thing. She had persistence, the capacity to be a pest, to annoy. And, when you only have one weapon, you use it. So she annoyed this judge constantly.

She shouted aloud for justice in his courtroom: *Give me justice! Give me justice! Give me justice!*

She knocked on his chamber doors,
left messages on his voice mail.

She probably even found him teeing off at the golf course and showed up there shouting, *Give me justice! Give me justice! Give me justice!*

Finally, she wore the old judge down. The judge said to himself, *You know, I don't care about justice. I don't care about this widow, I don't like people, I don't like God and I don't care about anybody. But this woman is about to drive me crazy! I'm going to give her what she wants just to get her off my back.*

And that's the story that Jesus told us that we might pray always and not lose heart. It's not exactly the most inspiring story about prayer I've ever heard.

I heard a similar kind of story the other day about the day that Mother Teresa went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, a legendary Washington criminal lawyer. He was a powerful lawyer. He at one time owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles and he was the lawyer for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, among others.

Evan Thomas's biography of Williams tells the story about when Mother Teresa visited Edward Bennett Williams because she was raising money for an AIDS hospice. Williams was in charge of a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help.

Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, *You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do.* Well, they agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no.

Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was like a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, *We're touched by your appeal, but no.*

Mother Teresa said simply, *Let us pray.* Williams looked at Dietrich; they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no.

Mother Teresa said, *Let us pray*. Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, *All right, all right, get me my checkbook!*

And from what we know now from Mother Teresa's private journals and letters, that she had periods of terrible doubt, feeling far away from God, feeling at times that God was not hearing her at all, her persistent prayer becomes all the more meaningful, doesn't it.

Maybe that's what Jesus wants: pray like that, pray like Mother Teresa, pray like the widow, cry out, bang on the doors of heaven with insistence.

[Thanks to Dr. Thomas Long, 30 Good Minutes, October 7, 2007]

Prayer is about refusing to believe the way things are has to be the way they will always be. It's about imagining how things could be, how the world could be, and gaining the wisdom and the energy to be a part of the change. It's about, if you remember the line from that song, how sometimes you have to *kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight*.

This parable is about persistence in prayer, but it's about more than that. I think it has to be more than that. Because if that's all there is, then there's a question that I have. And that is that if, as Luke tells us, God is not like Comcast, God is not like the unjust judge—not corrupt, not too busy, not too lazy, not uncaring—if God is not like the unjust judge, then why do we need to pray repeatedly until we get a result? What's the point of that? Is God just playing games with us? Is God saying, *OK, I'm going to respond to you, but you have to ask 5 times first?*

I think one thing that we have to take from this is that constant prayer isn't just about getting a result from God, it's about us. Constant prayer, a life of prayer, shapes the one who prays. Repeated, habitual prayer gradually sifts and tests what you believe is really important and what is just transitory, trivial. If something doesn't matter that much, the momentum for prayer is not going to last very long.

Maggi Dawn has a great line where she says, But if something does really matter, an unanswered prayer becomes like sand in an oyster—something that worries and annoys you until you are determined not to take no for an answer.

Constant prayer, a life of prayer, repeated prayer, shapes the one who prays. It opens me up to God's voice and God's presence in my life.

As Frederick Buechner wrote, persistence in prayer is a key, *not because you have to beat a path to God's door before [God will] open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of getting to your door*. Maybe there's no way of getting from God's door to yours.

Jesus' story is not only about the bad judge, and it's not only about the persistent widow. It's finally a story about God and about you and me. It's about our connection with God. It's about the beaten path between God's door and yours.

This story says, if a poor widow with no standing can finally wrangle justice out of a judge without honor, how much more will you—God's own child, the one God formed in the womb, the God who has loved you from the very beginning—find a God who will hear and answer prayer.

[Preaching Through the Christian Year – Year C]

There's a famous story about a young boy named Frank who was walking along the bank of the Mississippi River and he noticed in the river another boy about his age wrestling with a homemade raft. He said to him, *What are you doing?*

He said, *I'm going to take this raft out to that island in the middle of the river. I dare you to go with me!*

Well, Frank couldn't resist the dare so he scrambled down the bank and got on the raft. The two boys headed out to the middle of the river but the current was swift and strong.

As they approached the island, the raft broke up and sank and they had to swim to the island. And there they were, abandoned on an island, late in the afternoon. Nobody knew where they were. What would they do?

Right at that moment, one of those paddle-wheel steamers started coming down the river and Frank ran to the edge of the island and began screaming and waving his hands, *Help! Help!*

The other boy said, *Don't waste your breath. They can't hear you and even if they could they wouldn't pay any attention to boys like us.*

But just at that moment the paddlewheel steamer turned toward the island. The boy said to Frank, *How did you do that?*

And Frank said, *Well, there's something you don't know. The captain of that boat is my father!*
[Thanks to Thomas Long for this story]

When you pray, this is not Comcast you're trying to get hold of; it's not an unjust judge.

The captain of the universe is our father and how much more will one who has formed us in the womb respond to our every cry. So pray always and don't lose heart. Make a beaten path between God's door and yours.