

Sermon Proper 24 Year C

[RCL] Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 119: 137-144; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

Returning to Pray

Brother Geoffrey Tristram of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist (SSJE) Episcopal Monastery in Cambridge, MA witnessed profound spiritual healing in Cairo, Egypt. Brother Tristram noticed a man kneeling before the altar at Saint John the Baptist Coptic Church. Two others flanked the kneeling man with their hands on his shoulders. Seventeen others stood praying around this trio.

The man kneeling stood up, leading the group to another altar where he knelt again. Brother Tristram inquired about their actions. The man kneeling was dying. Doctors exhausted all options. Family members brought their loved one on a pilgrimage, praying at all the church altars and Holy Shrines in Old Cairo. Brother Tristram reflected on his experience. “I was struck by their fervent faith and their love, both for this man and for God. I don’t know what happened to him. I had witnessed an event of profound spiritual healing.”¹

Jesus told the parable of a persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8, using her as the model to pray always and not lose heart. Someone wronged her, and she sought justice. It was normal during her time for people to accept their fate. This widow was different because she did not accept her fate. She repeatedly visited the judge saying, “Grant me justice.” When the judge refused, she kept coming. The judge finally granted her justice so that “she may not wear me out by continually coming.” (Luke 18:5) Jesus asked if he would find this amount of faith on earth.

The widow modeled faithfulness in prayer. Her actions expanded the idea of prayer to include the believer’s entire and whole life.² The widow showed continual prayer. Continual prayer differs from continuous or perpetual prayer. Some churches have continuous prayer on Maundy Thursday leading into Good Friday, with groups of people praying hourly through the night before the Altar of Repose. Continual prayer is prayer that starts and stops and starts again. Returning to God in prayer day after day is continual prayer.

Prayer is conversation with God. Christians believe that God initiates prayer. When we pray, it is the Holy Spirit speaking to us, calling us to prayer. God is always communicating. We are not always listening. Prayer is a conversation beginning with God and flowing to us. Our response to God completes the prayer cycle.

¹ Tristram, Geoffrey. “Intercession.” SSJE. October 20, 2009. Accessed September 29, 2016. <http://ssje.org/ssje/2009/10/20/intercession-br-geoffrey-tristram/>

² Fitzmyer, Joseph, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX of The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 1176.

Brother Geoffrey Tristram of SSJE teaches the importance of Christians having an altar or sacred place in their homes, a place to return day after day to pray. The altar can be a table with candles, a cross, bible, or prayer book. On the other hand, it can be an unassuming place near a window overlooking nature's beauty. This becomes a place of continual prayer.

Returning to the same place to prayer trains the body to pray. Crossing the prayer threshold signals to the body it is time to pray. This is significant since there will be times in your life when you cannot find the words to prayer: a loved one dies; life's circumstances weigh you down. Prayer in those moments are the "sigh prayers" of Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Your body will lead your spirit in prayer when returning to the same place to pray daily.

Some couples renew their wedding vows on anniversary milestones. One couple at an Episcopal parish in Dallas, Texas renews their wedding vows each year near their anniversary date. Year after year the couple returns to the church, standing in front of the altar during a weekday Holy Eucharist service, repeating prayers and offering their marriage to God for continued blessing. One year the couple renewed their vows in Jerusalem while on pilgrimage. The couple's choice to continually return to God and the place of marriage helps shape their marriage.

Jesus uses the widow in his parable to model faith and prayer. Her only weapon is persistence.

We as Christians cannot lose heart. We cannot give up even when prayers seem to go unanswered. Can we find the faith to prayer in the midst of disorderly lives? Return to God in prayer. Return to your place of worship week after week. Return to your home altar, your place of prayer in your house, day after day. Returning to God, church, and your home altar allows the Holy Spirit to mold your body to pray, transforming you into a Christian who continually converses with God. Amen.

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