

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC October 20, 2019
29th Sunday of Year C Luke 18:1-8

A friend of mine who had visited Japan told me about a visit he made to a Shinto shrine. At the entrance he saw a small kiosk where worshipers could purchase large wooden coins. The purpose of these coins was that upon entering the shrine the worshiper would throw the wooden coins into a box, creating a loud noise. The ritual was structured so as to get the attention of the gods, to make sure that the gods knew someone was there praying, asking for some favor or blessing from the gods. The pagan gods were viewed as strangers to human need, inattentive and indifferent, aloof to people's concerns. So, the pagan deities had to be woken from their slumber by elaborate rituals in order to be informed of the worshiper's request for their divine assistance.

Jesus told His disciples that they did not need to rattle on their prayers with lengthy formulas like the pagans. For Jesus, prayer is not a matter of trying to get God's attention, because God is already there; God is close; God is already at work in our lives. God is "the mystery" as St. Paul writes, "in whom we live and move and have our being." For Jesus, the point of prayer is for us to be awakened to God's presence. Today's parable is to be seen in the context of Jesus teaching on prayer. We have to avoid seeing the widow and the dishonest judge as a one-to-one correspondence between ourselves and God, for nowhere does Jesus speak of God as a dishonest judge. In the parable, the woman besieging the judge is not so much us getting on God's case, alerting God to our needs, having God move around the heavy furniture in our lives, so to speak, doing the things for us to we can't do for ourselves. Rather, it is God already with us, trying to awaken us to the Divine presence, trying to have us catch the true sense of things, to help us discover in the ordinary hints of the extraordinary. For example, to see in the wrinkled skin of both a newborn baby and an aged person the mystery of life. The parable is not so much about us reaching out to God, but God reaching out to us. The parable is encouraging us to be persistent in that openness.

Prayer is the art of positioning ourselves in God's presence, locating ourselves within the Mystery Who is God. That is why we begin our prayers by making the sign of the cross—to situate ourselves within the Trinity, recalling that we are within God and God is within us. When we pray we are reminding ourselves that we are just human beings, not gods. We are relieved of the burden of having to make ourselves the centers of our universe, or that we have to get everything right. We are reminded that we are not in complete control of the events of our lives, although for many

things we are indeed responsible. Prayer helps us to make sense of what's going on in our lives—to catch the possibilities of the present moment; to engage life more fully and not flee from its ambiguities. In prayer we come to understand how we dwell in the presence of the mystery of God.

We can just look at the example of Jesus, and see when and how He prayed. It was when the crowd wanted to make Him their king, later when they rejected Him, before He chose the apostles, in the garden of Gethsemane. It was often at some turning point in His ministry. Prayer for Jesus, and for us, has that quality of understanding and positioning—trying to see where we fit in the scheme of things; trying to discover and discern God's will for our lives. So, prayer is a kind of reflection and recollection. It has to be connected with the events of our lives, with what's going on in our lives, with what may be our genuine feelings of anger, of rage, of despair, of gratitude. Here the book of Psalms of the Old Testament can be helpful because there we discover a welter of all sorts of human emotions, positive and negative. Here we see the origins of full-throated kvetching, a reminder that we don't have to censor our thoughts or our feelings before God.

Prayer lifts us up, preventing us from being too immersed in the events of our lives. We need some way to distance ourselves from what we are going through, some kind of perspective, the perspective that comes from viewing matters from God's perspective—the perspective of faith. Otherwise we can be like flies trapped on sticky paper, so caught up in the events of the day that we are easily overwhelmed, even flattened by them. We have to get away at times from the crush of events, just as did Jesus on those occasions when He prayed. We need sacred places like churches, we need sacred times like the Sabbath, the Lord's day, to remind us that every place is sacred, every time can be an opportunity to find God. God is never far from our personal problems, and the possibilities we have to grow in the face of those problems.

Prayer is what we mere creatures do with our lives in God's presence—trying to discover God's will when our egos, our fears, our resentments get in the way. We pray, not when we try to change God's mind (so to speak), but when are willing to have our minds changed; when we open ourselves to possibilities that our anxieties keep us from recognizing; when we open ourselves to the path to which the Lord is leading us. Let us quiet our minds and our thoughts long enough to hear what God is trying to tell us. May we be willing to spend time on what the unbeliever sees as a waste of time—to do nothing but place ourselves in God's presence with only the willingness to do God's Will, the Will that ultimately is for our own good, however slowly but surely that Will is being revealed to us.