

# ST BART'S



**A Sermon by:**

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

## Enough

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 20, 2013  
The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 18:1-8*

Today's sermon is about praying and about losing heart and particularly about how one helps prevent the other. Jesus told his disciples that they needed to pray always and not to lose heart. And then according to Luke, he told them a very strange parable to help drive home his point. Let's just say that I am glad he stated his point prior to telling the story. The parable can make it sound like God is similar to the grumpy judge who only gave in because the pushy widow worried the daylights out of him; it also seems to say that God answers when we "cry to him day and night," as though that is a guaranteed formula which always gets the results we desire. In our hearts, we know that isn't true.

Being a professional and all, I know a good bit about praying, though honestly "knowing" goes only as far as it goes, which in the practice of prayer is not terribly far. In the actual doing of it, I think all of us are pretty much in the same boat, doing the best we can. I also know about losing heart; in fact, I know a great deal about that. Anyone who has lived as many decades as I have is bound to know what that feels like.

There are almost as many books on praying as there are on dieting, and in each case doing it is better than reading about it. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he told them to say what we know as "The Lord's Prayer." After all these years it is still a pretty good place to start and maybe to end. If saying it seems rote and automatic, that is all the better. Deep inside us, these words operate in a way that is beyond words; and when we know them deeply in our souls, they will never fail us.

If I were to ask all of you this morning to evaluate your prayer life, most of you would say that it could stand some improvement. For the record, I'd say the same thing about mine. But I would catch myself pretty quickly to remind you and me that there is no scorecard here. We don't pray in order to be in compliance with the rules or to be good; we pray for one reason—to be in communion with God. When all else is said and done, when our thinking, speculating, and pontificating come to an end, praying is what remains about our search for God. In whatever package it presents itself—contemplation, meditation, conversation—prayer is our willing submission to a great cloud of unknowing, into which we project our small voices in search of a connection with an immense God. We do it in faith that our communion with God changes us in ways we sometimes recognize and about which we can speak but most often in ways we can barely perceive or understand.

In addition to telling them to pray, Jesus told this inner circle of his close friends to not lose heart, for he knew that to be human includes the capacity and inevitability of losing heart. We—all of us—lose heart. We lose heart in countless ways over some things that are macro and beyond much of our control and in some things that are so personal we can barely speak of them. In the recent government shutdown, we experienced a national loss of heart. Bored and frustrated by our government's failure to work effectively, angry at one side or the other depending upon our politics, outraged that ordinary people's lives were affected by such shenanigans, we felt disheartened by the entire event. And then there is the disheartenment that cuts much closer, sometimes specific but often amorphous and present mostly in the dark of the night. Worries about our kids or our beloveds—will they do this or will they do that, about small things and large things, about terrorism and the economy, about our own health, about the unquestionable effects of aging, about the complicated human being (aka: jerk) for whom we work—all these worries which can cause us temporarily, or perhaps for a long time, to lose heart.

Of course, because we are adaptive people, we do all sorts of things not to lose heart—some efforts are better than others but all understandable. We use humor, which is good; laughter doesn't literally fix much, but it surely helps. I don't think we could make it—I should say I could not make it—without laughing. Scientifically I understand that laughter carries oxygen to my cells, and theologically I know that it carries joy to my heart. Some of us use exercise; for others of us the word "exercise" causes us to lose heart. Sometimes we deny having lost heart, which can work but only for a while. Many of us

use work or substances or relationships to keep ourselves from feeling that we have lost heart, dulling our feelings in general so as to survive the unmistakable disheartenment that is surrounding us.

So, of course, to lose heart is essentially human and unavoidable, but please don't stop listening there. The presence of God in our lives and in the world means that losing heart is not the end of the story. I believe that in this difficult passage Jesus is telling his disciples the way to avoid losing heart is to pray always, and further I believe that this remains a truth for us. But here is the rub: We have to figure out what we really believe about prayer and how we can expand our openness to God in a way that truly helps us. At the outset, I will show my cards: I believe that a life of prayer, which is another way of speaking of a centered, holy life in God, is the only way to successfully and joyfully survive life in this world.

Though I have been at this a long time, I am a beginner, and my guess is that I always shall be. In my heart I cling to a couple of truths with all my might and with all my faith: It is never God's desire that we lose heart but when we do, God is there to give it back to us. Each time we find our heart again, it is more awakened, more breakable, and more filled with love. I believe that this process of reclaiming heart happens through something we call prayer. Every time during the day when we feel the inclination, no matter how fleeting, to say, "God, help me" or "Thank you, God," in that moment we are reclaiming a principal truth: our hearts flourish in the love of and communion with God.

Though it is true that praying will not keep us from losing heart, it will show us the way back when we do. How we pray is less important than that we pray; turning toward God in search of more of God is always good. And, yet, unless we are careful about what we believe or expect about prayer, the act of praying itself can set us up to lose even more heart. Listen to me; though I may be wrong, I believe this with all my heart. While it is truer than anything in the world that prayer changes us, it does not change the circumstances of our lives. Often the changes in us change our circumstances, but prayer is not a magic card we play when life presents obstacles—the little ones or the ultimate ones. Bad things happen to people who pray and to people who do not. We must get this if we are going to live mature lives of faith.

This week some close friends of mine in another city got some bad news about a diagnosis, at least initially suggesting that a good long period of remission may be coming to an end. They do not know what is to come, and they are bereft; but *they are not faithless*, because their praying now and the praying they have lived for several years connect them to God, not to an outcome. If what we demand from prayer is being cured or being kept safe or knowing success, our demands themselves will cause us to lose heart. What God promises us is God's self—nothing more and nothing less.

It is hard to say exactly what Jesus knew about the coming events in his life and in the lives of the disciples, but he clearly knew that they would need to pray so as not to lose heart. And so do we, my beloved friends. We must pray until our hearts break and then pray some more—not to get what we want, as though grabbing this desired thing or another, but to be with and in and through God in whatever comes. We will not languish for we are and will be *with* God.

In the name and hope of God: *Amen*.