

"Look! Look!" shouted the bear cubs. "Little rubber cats that stick out their tongues when you squeeze them!" "Cubs," said Mama, "that will be quite enough! I don't want to hear another word" "Oh please!" they shouted. "May we have them? Please! Please! Please!"

Papa decided it was time to put a stop to all the fussing "Of all the outrageous, disgraceful, EMBARRASSING behavior I have ever seen," he roared "Brother and Sister have the worst case of the galloping greedy gimmies I've ever seen!"

So how many of you can guess the source of this little story? If you have been involved in the raising of children or grandchildren in the past 20 to 30 to 40 years, you have probably run across it. It's from *The Berenstain Bears Get the Gimmies*, one in a series of popular picture books by Stan and Jan Berenstain. Apparently *The Berenstain Bears* are shaping the adults of the 21st century as surely as *The Cat in the Hat* shaped the lives of their parents.

In each of these tales, a thorny family issue is handled by a family of bears -- Mama, Papa, Brother, Sister, Gramps and Gran -- and by the end of the story, some measure of peace is restored to their big treehouse in Bear Country. In the particular book I just mentioned, Gran and Gramps come up with a plan to help selfish Brother and Sister Bear get rid of a bad case of the "galloping greedy gimmies."

Wouldn't it be nice if all childish behavior could be eliminated by a single story? We wish that such books would solve behavior problems, but of course they cannot. Not by themselves, anyway. Kids are tough, and child-rearing is one of the greatest challenges any of us have ever, or will ever face. Children can at times be self-absorbed, defiant, inattentive, overly aggressive, and downright difficult to handle. A whole industry has grown up around parenting issues, with specialists offering a variety of books and videos to parents of difficult children. Does your

kid have the "galloping greedy gimmies?" It shouldn't take you long to find advice on limit-setting, problem-solving, to help you improve your parenting patterns. There are all kinds of resources, and YouTube videos out there, that offer up all kinds of advice.

Not to mention the fact that, we can even find some help in our Bibles as well. In Luke Chapter 18, Jesus tells the story of an adult who may well have been "a difficult child" in her youth: a widow who refuses to give up. She approaches a judge again and again, asking him to grant her justice against her opponent. The judge refuses at first, but finally decides to give her what she wants, since he fears that she will wear him out with her persistence.

You might say that in our narrative this morning, Jesus makes the point that God, like the judge, will "grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night," and he encourages his followers to be like the widow, praying persistently and faithfully. In fact, as we explore today's text in greater detail, I believe that at least two lessons emerge from what I like to call *the tale of a difficult child*.

The first one can help us come to an understanding that persistent prayer is the way to pray. After all, in Scripture we witness the importance of prayer in the life of Christ, and so it is fairly apparent that Jesus does not want us to be casual about our own prayer life, but to be serious, intentional, determined and disciplined with it. Julian of Norwich, a Religious recluse and Christian mystic says prayer "is yearning, beseeching and beholding" -- an activity which involves desiring, begging, imploring ... and finally seeing God, face to face. While it is doubtful that Jesus wants us to pester, harass, or annoy God, he most certainly wants us to be diligent in lifting up our requests to the Lord. After all, it is **in** our prayers that we grow closer to the One who is the source of every good and perfect gift!

I'm certain we can all agree that there is nothing wrong with being dependent on God, and full of desire for the gifts of God that give us an abundant

life. Archbishop Desmond Tutu once wrote, "We are made for God, we yearn to be filled with the fullness of God, and so we come asking the One who is always eager to give. We place ourselves in his hands as beggars, in the attitude of those who know they have nothing that they have not received, before the One who is ever the gracious one ready to give; beyond our asking and our deserving." He goes on to say that, "We are like a parched land thirsty for the gift of rain -- yearning, beseeching, waiting, and asking, and assured that we will be heard, and that we will be given. For Jesus taught his disciples to pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread.'" In other words, if we are persistent in prayer, we will see God more clearly, and will receive the gifts that are part of an abundant life. In addition, we will discover the second lesson that can be learned from our Gospel story for today.

Just as we are called to be persistent in our prayer life, persistent prayer is also faith-inspired prayer. Just as a difficult child will generally only make demands of a parent who loves him or her, and who will provide for them, they also know that if they ask their father for bread, he will not give a stone; and if they asks for a fish, he will not give them a snake. In the same way, those who pray persistently to God are people who have faith that God will answer them. They trust that the Lord will help them quickly, granting them justice and mercy, fullness of life and everlasting salvation.

Perhaps more than anything else, such difficult children long for God's love, and God's presence. They yearn to behold the Lord, to see him face to face. "Prayer is essentially the expression of our heart longing for love," writes another Christian mystic named Jeffrey Imbach. "It is not so much the listing of our requests, but the breathing of our own deepest request, to be united with God as fully as possible." Just as a persistent child really wants the attention of a parent, more than they want

a little rubber cat toy, a persistent child of God really craves the presence of the Lord more than any particular gift!

Jesus suggests that our God is like a good parent: taking a stand early and showing neutrality and firmness. God will “quickly grant justice” to his chosen ones, who cry to him day and night! And the fact that some people these days are difficult, is reflected rather well in the bumper stickers people put on their cars: *”The More people I meet, the more I like my dog.” *Sometimes I wake up grumpy, other times I let him sleep.” *Sorry, I don’t date outside my species. *”I don’t suffer from insanity, I enjoy every minute of it.” *” How can I miss you, if you won’t go away?” *And a special one for parents of challenging children: “Be nice to your kids. They’ll choose your nursing home.”

During his earthly ministry Jesus warned his disciples that they would experience trouble in this life. It’s as sure as breathing, so Christians stand in a kind of tension. A sin-tainted world will always provide injustices, but we believe that God uses His truth and His followers to bring redemption to those who need it. Justice has *already* come through the potential of the gospel meeting real life today.

But, there is also a *not-yet* element to the response given by the Judge in our story this morning. In fact, confused by the carefree life of the ungodly, the writer of Psalm 73 comes to a *not-yet* reflection on God’s justice: “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.” Their end is the final judgment of God. Only he controls perfect justice, and it is dispensed completely only in the afterlife.

The famous Christian author N.T. Wright touches on something similar to this when he describes our hope for God’s intervention against brokenness: “We’re like moths trying to fly to the moon. We all know there’s something called justice,

but we can't quite get to it." And yet, there's only one Person you need to know, one Advocate against our opponents, one Judge. While we're often left longing for things in this life to be put right, as N.T. Wright puts it, this very longing shows that our hearts are beating with God's heart. And it's this longing, which must always live on, is always, or it should always be showing up in our own prayers.

The God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers, that is what we are really praying for." Persistent prayer is not a sign of the "galloping greedy gimmies"; it is a sign of our intense desire for God's presence, God's power, and God's peace. And if we act like difficult children, at times with our demanding behavior, we are in good company. The Lord we worship is nothing less than a persistent God: eternal, everlasting, the Rock of Ages, a Mighty Fortress, the source of all steadfast love.

Difficult children and even difficult adults -- are persistent -- as we all should be in prayer. God grants justice to his chosen ones "who cry to him day and night," and Jesus commends the faith of people who pray always, and do not lose heart. There are many positive qualities associated with being a difficult child -- energy, organization, determination and persistence -- and all can be an asset to a life of faith, helping us to maintain a lively, ongoing relationship with our Lord. The challenge is for us to keep our focus on God, and the abundant life he offers us, and not fall victim to the galloping greedy gimmies. Thanks be to God. Amen.