



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to *30 Good Minutes!* We're so happy to have you with us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I'm Lydia Talbot.

Daniel Pawlus: And I'm Daniel Pawlus. Welcome to the first program of our new season and our 53rd year on television. Today we welcome back a great friend, Dr. Tom Long, Professor of Preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Tom will use the parable of the widow and the judge to help us understand what it means to "pray always and not lose heart."

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back Grace Imathiu, who will join us from time to time this season in our "Reflection" segment. Today, she'll reflect on prayer as a way to invite God into any situation.

Daniel Pawlus: And we begin with a profile of Chicago actress, Paddy Lynn. She portrays Emily Dickinson in a one-woman show that reveals how her poetry is very much like prayer. Let's watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Paddy Lynn: I share with Emily the same type of spirit. I think Emily had to have something sacred inside of her to be able to write the poems that she wrote. Emily's poems are always a conversation with God. She would find poetry in everything: a bee, a butterfly, a flower, a stone, as snake. Emily has poems that are as simple as:

*A bird came down the walk;
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.*

I love the great outdoors. I experience God from the time I wake up and open the window and let the light come in to the room. Emily embodies the nature in God. That's a deep connection that I have with her. This one particular poem, I love this poem and it goes like this:

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,*

*And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.
I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.*

I think we all have an idea or at least a hope that when we pass on from this life and move upward, who will we see? And I have a feeling that Emily will be right next to God and I'll come up, probably dazed and confused, and they'll both just be there for me. And it will make that transition even more amazing. There are certain moments, I think, in everybody's life where they feel that they will never be the same because of some thing that happened in their life. And I can truly say that my experience with performing and given the opportunity to be Emily has really impacted and changed my life for all the good. I feel very blessed!

INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul..." My favorite poem from my favorite poet! For more information about Paddy Lynn, you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org. Thank you, Paddy, for that glimpse into Emily Dickinson's soul and yours.

Now, let me tell you more about today's speaker. Dr. Thomas Long is the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Tom is a "preacher's preacher," the kind that other preachers admire and often imitate. For the rest of us, he's someone we can rely on to plumb the depths of a good Bible story and explain what it means in our lives. Tom has become a regular visitor to *30 Good Minutes* and we're so delighted to have him back on the program. Welcome, Tom.

MESSAGE

Thomas Long: Thank you, Lydia.

When the late composer Leonard Bernstein was composing his famous contemporary *Mass*—his rock, blues and jazz *Mass*—he said that he wanted it to be "an honest *Mass*." What he meant was that he wanted the words and music of this *Mass*, this worship service, to ring true even to people who didn't see themselves as particularly religious, or churchy.

Well, as such, he knew that the most demanding moment in the *Mass* would not be "Credo," "I believe." Most people out there believe in the culture, at least believe vaguely, in God. The most demanding moment would not be *Credo*. It would be *Oremus*, "Let us pray." Because to pray, to talk to God, we cannot hedge our bets about God, we have to move beyond vagueness and enter into a relationship with God.

Sure enough, in Bernstein's *Mass*, when it comes time to pray, a chorus begins to intone a traditional prayer of confession, but then a lone tenor voice soars up above the others to sing:

*If I could, I'd confess.
Good and loud, nice and slow
Get this load off my chest
Yes, but how Lord, I don't know.*

*What I say, I don't feel
What I feel, I don't show
What I show, isn't real
What is real, Lord?
I don't know.
No, no, no, I don't know.*

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus told his disciples a parable because they were having problems with prayer. Now Leonard Bernstein may have assumed that only contemporary, and non-religious people would have problems with prayer, but Jesus knew better. We all have problems with prayer. 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:

We pray for health, but there is still a spot on the X-ray.
We pray for peace, but the troops aren't home and the war rages.
We pray for our children, but they still get into deep trouble.

We have problems with prayer, but when we go all the way down, our deepest problem with prayer is 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 an absolutely horrible judge. This judge hated people and he hated God. He didn't go to church and he refused to give to the United Way. 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 nor 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, did I say that she had nothing? That's not quite accurate. She did have one thing. She had 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 answering machine. She probably even found him teeing off at the Golf Club 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. Now, what are we supposed to get out of that story that will help us pray always and not lose heart?

Well, some people say that maybe Jesus wants us to keep our eyes focused on the bad judge. He does tell the disciples, “Pay attention to what this unjust judge says.” And if we pay attention to the judge, well, what do we see? What we see is that, even though he was a horrible man, at the end of the day he did give the woman the justice that she demanded and needed. So maybe what Jesus is teaching us is that, even though the headlines in the newspaper often show a world of corruption and evil, this is, you know, God’s world, this is a world ruled and overruled by a loving and just God, and at the end of the day, there is justice after all. Maybe that’s what Jesus wants us to see.

Well, I believe that and I think that’s part of it, but I don’t think that’s not the heart of Jesus’ story, because if that’s all Jesus wanted us to see, the moral of this story would be, “Take heart. Things are not as bad as they seem.” But the moral of this story is “Pray always and do not lose heart.”

OK, maybe Jesus wants us to focus our attention on the poor widow. Did you notice how she went after what she needed? It was, after all, her persistence—“Give me justice! Give me justice!”—that managed to wrangle justice from the unjust judge.

I heard a delightful 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 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!”

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.

Well, that's part of it, to be sure. But that's not all of it. If that were the whole meaning of Jesus' story, then the moral of the story would be "Be feisty. Pray always." But the moral of this story is, "Pray always and don't lose heart."

No, Jesus' story is not finally about the bad judge and it's not finally about the insistent widow. It's finally a story about God and about you and me. 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.

There's a famous story about a young boy names 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!"

Well, 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.

CONVERSATION

Daniel Pawlus: If you'd like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Dr. Thomas Long, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Tom Long. Tom, you have such a wonderful way of making your message accessible to us which I so appreciate. I loved you calling out the story of Mother Teresa and the simplicity of that story. I wonder if we make our prayer life and our act of prayer too complex sometimes. Do you think we purposely complicate it in ways?

Tom Long: Well, I don't think we purposely complicate it but I think we do end up backing ourselves into a corner about prayer. We have so many questions and issues and problems about prayer. We can finally talk ourselves out of the basic reality of prayer which is a personal relationship with God, almost as child to parent as I talked about in the sermon.

Lydia Talbot: You really have a way of plucking the core of the parable, don't you, Tom. I mean most people might only get the surface meaning but you bring out and help us reveal the underlying meaning. But you leave us hanging with a big challenge, too, as you say, to find a God hears and answers prayer. I have to ask you, what was that process for you personally? How did you move into a relationship with that kind of God?

Tom Long: Well, I think the very fact that Jesus uses a parable to talk about prayer speaks to my own experience of prayer. A parable is one of those literary devices that just at the moment you think you've got it, a trap door opens and you fall down to another level, another depth. And that's been the way prayer has been for me. I was raised in a Christian home. I was raised in a praying home. So prayer came sort of naturally to me. It was like breathing air. But as I matured, of course, I began to realize that there were challenges in my life and that prayer was not all that easy or simple. So when things would happen in my life, when someone I loved I lost or a child was born, or one of my children got in trouble, prayer became a wrestling match with God and a trapdoor would open and fall down to a new depth. And I would find at the end of the prayer, I had not only received an answer from God but I'd gotten a new relationship with God.

Daniel Pawlus: I think all of us have a desire to probably pray more than we do. The thing that struck me about the parable was: pray always. What do you think always means? It's a different think for everybody, but there is some discipline as a part of this, isn't there?

Tom Long: There is some discipline involved, although I think what is really being pointed to there is more of a "Fiddler on the Roof" spirituality.

Daniel Pawlus: OK. What do you mean by that?

Tom Long: Well, Tevya, in "Fiddler on the Roof" is always talking to God. He's looking at heaven, "Five daughters! Five daughters!" as he's doing his chores, delivering the milk, or walking along the lane. And I think a kind of an ongoing conversation is the fundamental way that we pray always. And then that begins to be focused in corporate worship and in the discipline of private prayer. But those focused moments are really concentrated moments that represent a totality of an ongoing daily fabric of conversation with God.

Lydia Talbot: You said you grew up in a praying home and I guess I wonder what kind of images do you think your own children have of your home that you conveyed.

Tom Long: I'm like most parents. I am both pleased with the religious traditions that I've delivered to my children and disappointed that I didn't give them a deeper one. We were also a praying family and we would read Scripture together and do the thing that you ought to do. But sometimes I realized I didn't engage my children in conversations about the faith in ways that I should have. I see them with their own children now experiencing the same things and I'm both proud of what they have and rueful of the fact that I missed some opportunities.

Lydia Talbot: I want you to give us an example. We need some nouns. Prayer, like faith, is a semantically bumpy road for most people, as you say. We all have problems with prayer. So what's at the top of your prayer list these days, Tom? And give us an example of how you pray.

Tom Long: I pray in lots of different ways. I have the good fortune to be a teacher at a theological seminary and we have prayer at our school every day. I don't always go but I go several times a week. And in a sense that's kind of cheating because I have built into the structure opportunities to pray with others. What we do is we go into the chapel and we name people, events, specific things in the community. And so those issues are always before us. I've tried to incorporate that into my private practice as well. I don't simply pray, "Thank you God for this day. How beautiful it is." But I want to name at least five names.

Lydia Talbot: Give us one.

Tom Long: Melanie Shaw, my daughter. I name her because she's now developing a new vocation and it's a struggle for her and an excitement for her. And so she is right there at the top my prayer list.

Daniel Pawlus: There are so many different ways to pray I guess, too, which is interesting to me. Can you give us a kernel of wisdom about to find what might work for you or for our viewers? I talk with my spiritual director and we talk about the Jesuit *examen*, for instance, which is a way that speaks to me. But there are different things for different people, aren't there?

Tom Long: Exactly. For example, one of the things we do at our school is our chaplain will put out the labyrinth and people will walk the labyrinth and pray. That doesn't work for me. I don't find much meaning in the labyrinth. But there are people who profound meaning of walking that labyrinth. We have a small chapel where people can pray privately and pray by themselves. I can do that. But the prayer that is most meaningful for me praying with others in a service of worship. With others, not in simply a formal liturgy but where we can have conversation before we pray and put our prayer concerns out there.

Lydia Talbot: In our final moment, Tom, how do you think that people perceive prayer in this market culture in which we live? So often people are caught up in a gospel of health, wealth and success and their prayers reflect those kinds of desires.

Tom Long: I think that's right. I think we sometimes get a too close a cause and effect issue on prayer. We think, "Alright, I want this and then let's see if God will give it to me." Where prayer is actually is the energizing of a more fundamental relationship with God and the answers come slower and deeper and in ways we never expect.

Daniel Pawlus: Tom Long, it's always great to have you with us on the show. We appreciate your being here.

Tom Long: Thanks.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Daniel Pawlus: And now, Grace Imathiu, a native of Kenya and pastor of Brown Deer United Methodist Church in Brown Deer, Wisconsin, brings us a final thought on prayer.

REFLECTION

Grace Imathiu: Prayer is an invitation to God to come and be with us in our situation. Now God, of course, is always with us, but prayer makes our hearts welcoming and cognizant of God's presence. A few years ago when our car broke down in a deserted spot on one of Kenya's rural roads, the uninvited guests of panic and fear crept into our hearts. My mother and I held hands and invited God into our situation. And God did come! Mother's hands gripping mine were part of God's presence. When we heard what sounded like hyenas in the distance, our laughing to tears who would volunteer to be the hyena's appetizer was God's cheerfulness with us. Pray without ceasing says the Scripture. Invite God in all your situations!

CLOSING REMARKS

Daniel Pawlus: Thank you, Grace, and our thanks again to Dr. Thomas Long, Paddy Lynn, and you for joining us today on *30 Good Minutes*. I'm Daniel Pawlus.

Lydia Talbot: And I'm Lydia Talbot. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us on *30 Good Minutes*, may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.