Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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Wouldn't you like a bit of real magic now and then? What's the difference between magic and asking for results in prayer?

We've all heard lots of people pray for sunshine for the picnic, rain for the garden or good snow for skiing. Is the assumption that God's job includes changing our circumstances if we ask hard enough? Catholic school taught us about the nine first Fridays and we collected more plenary indulgences than we could count. Is that what religion is all about?

As children, my brother, cousin and I tried to force Mary's hand by praying like the children at Fatima, convinced that with the right combination of cousins and an abbreviated rosary, Mary would come to us like she did to them. We wasted a lot of time in that endeavor — she didn't come, and we didn't really pray. We couldn't find the magic formula that would make heaven do our bidding.

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 19, 2025

Exodus 17:8-13
Psalm 121
2 Timothy 3:14-4:2
Luke 18:1-8

Today's story of Moses praying with arms outstretched so that his army would win the battle sounds like our childhood theology. Whenever Moses' muscles failed him, the battle went the other way, but arms up made his people the winners. Happily, he didn't need to do it all alone. Unlike Sen. Cory Booker, Moses got to sit on a rock while others bolstered his arms until the victory went to his people.

Why did Moses' raised hands work their effect? Was it a contract: "God, I'll do this if you do that"? Did the Israelites win the battle because Moses' raised hands persuaded God or did his persistent vigilance inspire his people with the strength they needed?

Today's Gospel doesn't give us any magic. This story seems to favor the squeaky wheel. As Jesus was teaching the disciples to "pray always without growing weary," he told the story of a disreputable judge who didn't give a whit about anyone. Confronted by a widow who pestered him incessantly, the judge finally ruled on her behalf, not for any good reason, but because his discomfort at her persistence overpowered the laziness or prejudice that allowed him to ignore her in the first place.

Did Jesus spin this parable to explain the relationship between God and creatures who need help? Would Jesus have depicted the Father as needing to be cajoled? Some people may think so.

When we see wars and famine and dishonesty in the highest places, does that indicate that God doesn't care enough to step in? Have we not prayed long or sincerely enough for things to change? Are we supposed to wear God down like a parent who doesn't want a 9-year-old to have a smartphone but can't bear the whining?

Paul's letter to Timothy offers a perspective on this. Paul tells Timothy to be persistent whether it is convenient or not: "Convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching." Now, that's a different sort of perseverance! Paul wants Timothy to do everything possible to encourage others to live the Gospel.

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How might that idea refocus our perception of the widow at the judge's door? She got what she needed and more, because she wouldn't stop. She shook the judge out of his apathy. She didn't quit until, in desperation, he did something righteous.

That may not have changed him deeply, but it did bring him to do at least one just thing. She did what Paul told Timothy to do, and she got a result that was good for everyone.

How are we supposed to be persistent? Is it in asking God to transform cruel and dictatorial people into good, loving individuals? If so, just how do we expect God to do it? If God could intervene like that, why do we see the suffering we do?

Let's consider the idea that Jesus was talking from his experience of trying to convince the dubious and to hearten people who thought his message would cost them too much. His most basic prayer was, "Your will be done." That followed what his mother had taught him by her prayer, "Let it happen to/through me according to your will."

When we pray for the good that should happen, we can't do it like students at Hogwarts who only need to practice using their wands or find a good wizard. Praying in the style of Jesus is an exercise in self-offering. When we long for the right outcomes in our world, sincere prayer needs to spring from a longing for God's will, combined with our readiness to carry it out.

A warning: Persistence in generous prayer will cost us our lives. The good news? There's no better way to spend one's life.

God is persistent in planting good desires in us. Let us be ever more persistent in offering ourselves to carry out God's loving will.

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