

Superficially, the common theme of today's Scripture readings is that when we persist in prayer together things go well, and they don't go as well when we don't. The message goes deeper than that, though. Let's take a look.

Consider Moses and his battle with the Amalekites. Had others not held his arms up, it would've been a sad day for the home team. But in his humility, which we'll touch upon again shortly, he asked for help, got it, and things turned out well. So it is for us, too. One of the principal reasons we regularly gather together at mass like this is to hold each other up in prayer. There's no such thing as a standalone Catholic.

There's a story about the pastor of another church around here who went to visit one of his parishioners whose churchgoing habits were not exceptionally brilliant. "We called him 'The Submarine Catholic'," the pastor said. "Most of the time you wouldn't see him, but then he'd break the surface at Christmas and Easter and show up."

"I went to visit him one chilly fall evening, just a friendly call, and we chatted for a bit. There were so many more interesting and important things going on in his life, he told me, that he didn't have time for church. We sat around his fireplace and he told me all about his business, his teenagers' games and dancing lessons, as well as his wife's interests and his own love for travel and golf."

"When I need to talk to God, I just do it on my own," he told me confidently, "I don't see why I need to go to church to do that." I wondered what he didn't understand about the Eucharist. Anyway, we sat there quietly together for a little bit, as his statement hung in the air between us. Then I took the tongs, reached into the fire and pulled out a glowing ember. I put it in on the stone apron in front of the firebox and returned the tongs to their spot. Then we simply stared at the ember as it slowly went out while the main fire kept burning brightly. Neither of us said a word as we watched the ember's light decay. After a few moments our eyes met and he said, "Got it. I'll see you in church this weekend."

Of course, we can and should pray on our own but it's crucial to recognize in the communal nature of the Eucharist that our ultimate destiny is for all of us to participate

together in the interior life of the Holy Trinity – an endless, infinite relationship of love, with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Along with the notion that we're all in this together, Scripture tells us how best to approach God in prayer. Moses and the poor widow had a couple of traits that for some reason God finds particularly appealing: humility and persistence.

Moses, we're told in the Book of Numbers¹ was not only humble, he was the humblest man on earth. The widow, who in her time, as you've heard many times from this ambo, had no stature in her society. That she was aware of her status and unintimidated by it makes her humble by definition.

Likewise, nowhere in the Bible does Moses give up, even when he has been completely ignored, threatened with death and otherwise abused. So it was, too, for the widow, who I'm sure you can see, stands for us in the imagery of the story. Giving up's simply not an option for either of them.

Indeed, when St. Paul tells us to pray continuously, he's talking about that kind of persistence. The relationship of love that's forged in God's persistent involvement with us and our humble, persistent involvement with God is meant to last forever. Persistence, simply because of what it is, draws us ever closer to God, and that, it seems, is God's end game. Giving up's not an option.

God wants us to win, to enjoy eternal life together with him, and isn't irritated by our persistence. Indeed, it would be an error to equate the mean-spirited judge of the gospel with God. God's response to our faithful persistence in prayer is actually quite different. Rather than a grudging reaction to an annoyance, it's much more like the way it is in courtship, where the guy chases the girl until the girl catches the guy; we persist in chasing God until God catches us.

¹ Numbers 12:4

My friend George told me the story of his courtship one day. It's so similar to our Gospel. "I thought Alice would never pay any attention to me when we were in college together. I'd first seen her in a psych class and was attracted to her speech, her appearance and especially her kindness to everyone except me. But who was I, anyway? She was beautiful and I was...well, you can see, I haven't changed much over the years."

"She was always on the arm of one of the frat boys or sports stars. I would said 'Hi,' and she'd reply politely, but when I'd ask her if she wanted to have coffee or something with me, she'd always seem to have an excuse. But I kept asking anyway. I used to pray about us too. I had faith that if she ever came to know me, she'd like me, maybe even love me."

"Then one day, out of the blue, she said 'yes' to coffee. I figured she was just tired of having me pester her all the time and this was just a kind way to take me aside and tell me to go away. It turned out to be completely the opposite."

"As we sipped our coffee together, she told me that none of the other boys she'd dated ever seemed to want to find out who she really was. They just wanted to be seen with her on their arms, like some kind of trophy. 'You're different, George,' Alice had said. 'Something about your persistence told me you really wanted to get to know me.'"

"I do want to get to know you, Alice,' I'd said. We looked deeply into each other's eyes just then, and in that moment we both knew that it was the beginning of a story that would never end. I told you, Tim, I prayed and had faith that if she got to know me, she'd like me, maybe even love me. Well, she did."

It's even better than that with God. God already loves us. God asks us to have faith and persist in prayer because that's how we get to know each other and share our story. It's the conveyance by which we move from simple awareness that God's probably just around someplace to an awe-filled, ever-deepening love that never ends. The only question that remains for you and me is whether, when our Lord returns, he'll find faith like that persisting in us.