A child lies unconscious in a hospital bed, suffering from an illness that baffles the doctors. Outside the hospital room, the waiting room is full of huddled family and friends who are praying constantly for a miracle, interceding for Divine intervention to save their little girl. Meanwhile dozens of churches join in the vigil, listing the little girl on their prayer list. Hundreds more, many of them strangers to the family, but part of the extended family of faith, hear about the girl’s illness from sites like Facebook and Twitter, and they form an outer ring of prayer surrounding the immediate family and inner circle of concerned friends. The prayers ascend to the heavens, from the hearts of earnest and sincere believers, 24 hours a day, from various points on the globe. Still the small child suffers; her illness unabated. The wearied parents cry out to God, “How much more? She can’t take much more of this suffering. We can’t take much more.” As the illness lingers, at the back of many minds a thought emerges, almost too dark to even mention aloud,

Across the world, in China, a continent away, a small band of Christians huddle secretly in a house church, in a country where Christianity is outlawed. All of these believers had to sacrifice their businesses when they converted to Christianity, their families disowned them, and they must live in constant fear that they will be arrested and prosecuted for blasphemy against the official religion of the land. One of the members of the church has been arrested, and stands trial for sharing their faith in the public marketplace. The small circle of church members prays earnestly, continually, fervently, for the release—or at least faithfulness in suffering—of their friend, knowing that it could easily be them in the courts, (and probably will be them one day), facing the same fate. But the trial proceeds toward condemnation and punishment of the Christian witness, who faces the possibility of imprisonment or martyrdom for his faith, all of this despite the pleas from the international community, and pressure from humanitarian
groups, and the faithful intercession of the church. And some are tempted to ask, at least in their secret heart of hearts, “Where is God when such a faithful witness faces such persecution? If God was ever going to show up in a big way in the modern era, and answer these prayers with a dramatic rescue, similar to the time He parted the Red Sea for the Israelites to escape the Egyptian Pharaoh, wouldn’t this be an ideal time to do it? Why doesn’t God answer this prayer?”

These are perplexing questions, and they drive us to the very core of our faith, stretching our understanding of God, and erasing any trite or simple explanations of the problem of evil or suffering. We can spend a lifetime wrestling with these questions, and they cannot be pinned down with a bumper sticker slogan, or a single homily this morning. The answer is hidden within the character and mystery of God Himself.

It is this very question that Jesus tackles in our Gospel today. Jesus wants to encourage his followers to take prayer seriously, and to take God seriously. Jesus knows that prayer is our connection to the
mystery and majesty of God, a God who we can know with the intimacy of child calling out to its “Daddy.” But prayer is not giving God orders. Prayer is not an on-line shopping experience. Prayer does not reduce God to our servant, obligated to fulfill our whims or requests, even though God loves us more than we can imagine or deserve. Many times we can attest to answered prayers, times when we believe to our very core that God brought about a healing of body or spirit, or when God seemed to intervene in human history to bend it towards His Kingdom purposes. But why is it that sometimes God does not answer our prayers as we want, when we want, even when those prayers seem to be aligned to what we know of God’s desires? That is the thorny question, the mystery shrouded in the more perfect knowledge of God. It isn’t unanswered prayers that bother me most; it is delayed prayers that test my faith the most.

That is the very tension that Jesus addresses in our Gospel reading today. He tells a parable that is shocking, when you think about it. In the parable there is a calloused Judge who ignores a widow’s plea for
justice. She is powerless to force the Judge to do justice on her behalf. Yet she persists in her plea, gradually wearing down the stubborn Judge’s resistance. Only after realizing that it is taking too much of his time and energy to ignore her, and that she is not going away quietly, only then did this corrupt and uncaring Judge hear her case and render a just verdict. What a terrible man! Why would Jesus tell this story? And yet, to our surprise, Jesus uses this story to illustrate how his disciples should be like this widow, persistent in prayer, never giving up, even if it appears that the prayers are bouncing off heaven like the widow’s ignored pleas before the corrupt Judge. Does this mean that if we are to be like the widow, then God is like this uncaring Judge? Is Jesus urging us to badger God, to wear Him down, by our persistent praying, until He finally gives in to our persistence? I don’t think so!

Jesus is using a common teaching device of the Rabbis, called “from the lesser to the greater.” In other words, Jesus is saying that if even this corrupt Judge finally listened to the widow’s complaint, how much more would a loving God, who could not be more different than
this Judge, listen to His children?! Jesus used this same teaching device when he taught about prayer earlier in this Gospel, using the illustration of a reluctant friend who gives a neighbor some bread only because the neighbor will not stop knocking on the door at midnight. Is God a reluctant friend to us? Not at all. Just the opposite. As Jesus went on to say, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, would give him a snake instead? Or if he asked for an egg, would give him a scorpion? If you then, who are so much less loving and caring than God, know how to give good gift to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give what is needed and best to those who ask of him?”

So, Jesus does not give us a tidy answer to solve the mystery of why God sometimes does not seem to respond to prayers as we think He should. St. Paul was persistent in his prayer for healing of his “thorn in the flesh,” yet God’s answer was to learn the strength in weakness that thorn gave him. And on the cross, Jesus himself lifted a cry to the silent heavens that seemed to go unanswered—until Easter gave us all a new
perspective of Good Friday. So this seems to be the point Jesus is teaching us about prayer today.

…Keep praying, not because prayer forces God to answer, but because prayer keeps us in relationship with the One who can be trusted, even on the darkest days when it seems that our prayers go unheard.