

October 16th, 2022

Luke 18:1-8 “Lessons from a Bothersome Widow”

So ... you thought we were all finished with difficult-to-understand parables. Georgeanne was nice and gave you a break from parables last week with a healing story. But I'm back and it's parable time again! This one starts out with, “Then Jesus told them (a group of Pharisees) a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” No hidden agenda here! Why didn't we get that kind of introduction back in chapter 14 when Jesus was talking about hating your family? It's still challenging though.

At first glance, the moral seems to be “persistence pays off.” In fact, that's what this parable is usually called – “The Parable of the Persistent Widow.” Persistence is a good thing, right? It's a virtue that we try to instill in our children. We tell them, “Practice makes perfect.” If you want to play drums like a rock star, you've got to work hard. If you want to win the race or the wrestling match or the soccer game, you've got to run hard, fight hard, and play hard. As they get older we say, “If you want to succeed in business, you've got to hustle.” If you want to tackle a project that seems overwhelming, you've got to take it a chunk at a time. If you want to land a big job, you've got to show them you're hungry for it. We tell them inspiring stories – Listen, Thomas Edison tried and failed to invent the lightbulb 1,000 times, but he finally got it right. Dr. Seuss' first book was rejected by 27 publishers before it was accepted. Long before he was a famous NBA player, Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team. Walt Disney was fired from a newspaper because he lacked imagination and good ideas. It irks me when some people say, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” Not true! Tell that to a musician. Doing the same thing over and over again is *exactly* what you need to do to see results. Persistence pays off. There are exceptions to this however. Here are four words for you to ponder - “Are we there yet?” “Persistence pays off doesn't seem like such a great virtue now does it? If a child keeps asking, “Are we there yet?” the only

different result that they may experience might not be what they bargained for, especially when the adult in the car pulls over to the side of the road and says, “Glad you asked because we’re here now! This is our destination. Go ahead and get out of the car and have fun!” Maybe the lesson in this case is, “Persistence pays off, but not in the way you’d hoped!”

But the virtue of persistence is what this lesson in Luke’s gospel appears to be. And there are quite a few teachers, preachers and church movements who would agree that persistence in prayer *is* what this parable is about. “If you just pray hard enough, you’ll wear God down and God will *have to* answer your prayers in the manner and fashion that you hoped.” That sounds silly doesn’t it? The reason why this isn’t a very responsible or even healthy interpretation of this scripture is that it doesn’t address the righteous person with a pure heart and noble intentions who prays and prays but *doesn’t* receive what they desire. “Well you just didn’t pray hard enough. You need to be more persistent in your prayers. Maybe there’s some hidden sin in your life that you’re not addressing, and *that’s* why God isn’t answering your prayers.” See what a problem this becomes? See how spiritually vulnerable people can be manipulated by this kind of thinking? But this kind of thinking is at the heart of the health and wealth gospel movement. So how about we take that interpretation off the table this morning and look at it from another angle.

While some Bibles title this section, “The Parable of the Persistent Widow,” others call it, “The Parable of the Unjust Judge.” That title alone changes the entire focus of the parable doesn’t it? Here’s one of the first rules of Bible study – Always look at the context. Sometimes we take a short passage, like this one, and we limit our scope of learning to what’s written on the page in front of us. But, as we’ve learned, when you’re engaged in responsible Bible study, what’s written *before* the passage is often as important *if not more important* than the passage itself. To complicate matters, the editors of the Bible who divvied it up into chapters and verses often did it in ways that don’t make much sense.

I don't think we're equipped to fully understand this passage without considering the last seventeen verses of the previous chapter. Jesus had just finished a discussion with some Pharisees about when the kingdom of God would arrive. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is *already* among you." The Pharisees responded, "Really? Well, that's funny because we don't see any *evidence* that it's among us. You *say* that it's here among us, but all we see is Rome trying to crush us while the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer. What kind of evidence do you have that makes you think that it's already here?" And it is in the midst of that conversation that this parable comes.

Knowing the context of this passage, then, makes it clear that the first few verses of the parable is *not* about the rewards of being obnoxious. This is a parable about *encouragement*. And in this case, it's to encourage this group of Pharisees he's addressing to do three things - To **pray**, to **seek justice**, and to have **faith**. Now let's re-visit the parable. And let's be clear about something here – The *judge* is the bad example in this story. He does things out of his own self-interest. He's someone who has power, but he abuses it and has no sense of accountability whatsoever. Some people hear the word "judge" in a parable and automatically assume that "judge" represents God and God's agenda. But this judge is everything that God is not. This judge represents the opposite of God.

Here's what we know about God – God chooses to be in relationship with us. What we know is that God is a God of justice, mercy, grace, love and faithfulness. What we know about God is that God is with us at every moment in our lives. God listens to us. God struggles with us. We do not have a God who, like this judge, sits back on his privilege while we suffer. To the contrary – we have a God who suffers *with* us. God isn't like this judge who gets irritated at our pain. God is not the unjust judge. God is the farthest thing from the judge in this parable.

Let's get radical for a moment. I'm going to give you something to think about that might knock you out of your seats. What if this parable

is *not even about God*? What if this parable is about *us*? What if it's about what *we* do? Well, that means we have to take a look at the other person in this parable. Let's take a look at the widow. The widow is powerless. The widow has nothing. She has no social standing. But she has two things – Her persistence and her voice. One of the great features about Luke's gospel is that he loves to lift up widows as good examples. And in just about every story in Luke that mentions a widow, the widow is speaking with authority to power, which is funny because by all social standards of the day, widows were the least powerful people. And yet in Luke they are the ones who are constantly showing up to speak power and truth to authorities. That's what we have in this story. A widow that's using what she has which is her persistence, her claim to justice, and her voice to call for justice.

So let's go back to the point that Jesus is trying to make to these Pharisees – You've got to **pray**, you've got to **seek justice**, and you've got to have **faith**. Well who's doing that in this parable? The judge? No. It's the widow. And this fits into the idea of praying for the kingdom of God to arrive even when it doesn't look like it has a chance of happening. See, when everything seems to be crumbling all around us, whenever we're inundated with bad news, when nothing seems to be going right it's hard for *any* of us to see anything that resembles the kingdom of God unfolding around us. But there are so many *opportunities* for us to see the kingdom of God unfolding around us. There are opportunities to experience love and grace and transformation, and having our minds opened to the idea that the moral arc of the universe is leaning towards justice. Really? Yes, really. Okay, but what are *we* to do? Do we just sit back in our easy chairs and pretend that everything is alright even though there's so much evidence to the contrary? No. Because the call for justice means that we have to *be* there. We *can't* just lay back and pretend everything is perfect when, in fact, we have some genuinely painful issues we have to deal with before we can experience the fullness of God's kingdom.

This is where prayer comes in. Prayer is what brings things together whether it's a prayer of hope or a prayer of despair. Prayer is a reminder that God is there in relationship *with* us. Prayer isn't about changing God's will. It is about *molding us* into God's will and helping us to see the humanity in those we struggle to accept. It is to help us see the blessings that are set before us. It is about being thankful for the daily bread that has been given to us already before we've even asked for it. Prayer helps us see the world before us in the eyes of God and that's how we get to "see" this kingdom. Prayer can help us see God's reign even in the midst of all of our despair and all of what may appear to be insurmountable problems.

What was Jesus trying to teach the Pharisees? To **pray**, to **seek justice**, and to have **faith**. All these things need to be present if we're going to experience the fullness of God's reign. Consider the last words of our scripture lesson this morning – "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Good question. What *will* the Son of Man find? Will there be justice? Will there be a place where everyone has the same opportunities to live life abundantly? Because that's what "justice" means in this case. There are two types of words that are used for justice in the New Testament. One means "vengeance" and the other one means "equality." The latter is the one we're talking about here. Will there be justice? Will Jesus find people who are engaged in prayer, and not just the kind of prayer that asks God to shape the future to *our* desires? What will the Son of Man find? Justice? Prayer? Faith?

At the last Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, Georgia before the pandemic shut everything down, Barbara Lundblad, the professor for preaching and homiletics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City said something that I believe are appropriate words to close our time together this morning -

"If we pray without working for justice our prayers are empty. And if we work for justice without prayer, we will think it all depends on us. If we pray and work for justice without faith, then

we will fall to despair when justice isn't done. Prayer and justice and faith: What Jesus has brought together, let no one tear asunder.”