

Luke 18:1-8 “Persistence Pays Off”

Here’s yet another passage from the Gospel of Luke where it seems like the moral of the story is pretty clear at first glance. In the case of this particular story, often called “The Parable of the Persistent Widow,” the moral seems to be “persistence pays off.” Which, again, seems pretty apparent. It also seems to agree with what we teach our children, right? We tell them, “Practice makes perfect.” If you want to be a great pianist, you’ve got to work hard. If you want to win the 400 meter hurdles, you’ve got to run hard. If you want to succeed in business, you’ve got to hustle. Persistence pays off. If you want to tackle a project that seems overwhelming, you’ve got to take it one chunk at a time. Persistence pays off. If you want to land a big job, you’ve got to show them you’re hungry for it. Persistence pays off. Thomas Edison, in his effort to invent the lightbulb, supposedly tried and failed 1,000 times until he finally got it right. Persistence ... pays ... off.

Can we agree that “Persistence pays off” is a principle that stands on good ethical and moral ground? Can we agree, even, that it’s sound logic? If we work hard at something and never give up, we can achieve anything we want. True that? Okay. I have four words to challenge this assertion: “Are we there yet?” How many of you as children have ever gotten somewhere faster, felt like you accomplished something, or received an enlightening or satisfactory answer to the question, “Are we there yet?” How many of you as adults have ever put your foot on the gas pedal a little harder or taken the opportunity to teach children the basics of cartography as a response to, “Are we there yet?” So maybe persistence *doesn’t* always pay off!

But that’s what this lesson looks like doesn’t it? And there are quite a few churches who would agree and say that persistence in prayer *is* what this parable is about. “If you just pray hard enough, you will wear God down to the point where God will answer your prayers in the way and fashion that you hoped.” Now 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 how this is so problematic? See how vulnerable people can be manipulated by this kind of thinking? It's at the heart of the prosperity gospel movement and we all know how that's been misused to fleece people out of their money. So let's 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 title 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 contained only in the passage. But in responsible Bible study, what is written *before* the passage you're reading is often as important *if not more important* than the passage itself. To complicate matters, the editors of the Bible placed the chapters and verses in very odd places. I don't think we're fully equipped to understand the passage that Jerry read without knowing what was in 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, "Okay, that's great, but to be honest with you, we don't see any evidence that it's emerging 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 is your evidence that this is happening?" And it's in the midst of that conversation that this parable takes place. Knowing the context of this passage, then, makes it clear that the first few verses of the parable are *not* about the virtue of being obnoxious. This is a parable about encouragement. And in this case, it's to encourage the group of

Pharisees he's addressing to do three things: *To pray, to seek justice, and to have faith.*

Now, with that, let's re-visit the parable. Let's be clear that the Judge in this parable is the bad guy. He's unjust. He does what he does only for his own self-interest. He's someone who has power yet abuses it. He has no sense of accountability. These are all the things that God isn't. This judge is the "anti-God" strawman in the story. What we know about God is that God chooses to be in a relationship with us. We know that God is a God of justice and grace and peace. We know that God is with us in every moment of life. God listens to us. God struggles with us. We do not have a God who, like this judge, sits back in his opulent privilege while we suffer. We have a God who suffers with us. God isn't like this judge who gets irritated in the midst of our pain. God is not the unjust judge. Let's get that straight. God is the opposite of this judge.

In fact, let's consider something radical for a minute. What if this isn't a parable about God at all? What if it's a parable about us? What if it's about what we do? Let's take a look at the other person in this parable. Let's look at the widow. The widow is powerless. The widow has nothing. She has no social standing. But she has two things according to this story – She has her persistence, and she has 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 that mentions a widow in Luke's gospel, the widow is speaking with authority to power. Which is funny because by all the social standards of the day, a widow was one of the least powerful people you can imagine. Yet in Luke, there are these widows that are constantly appearing in the gospel to speak truth. That's what we have here in this story. A widow who is using what she has which is her persistence and her claim to justice to *call* for justice.

So let's go back to this idea that Jesus is trying to get across 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 widow!

And this fits into this idea of praying for the kingdom to arrive even when it doesn't look like it's going to happen. When everything sucks ... when everything is awful, it's hard for any of us to see any aspect of the Kingdom of God unfolding around us. And yet there are so many *opportunities* for us to see the Kingdom of God unfolding around us. There are opportunities to see love and grace and transformation and having our minds opened to the idea that the moral arc of the universe is bending towards justice.

So then what do we do? Do we just sit back on our laurels and pretend that everything is hunky-dory and that we're living in the fully-realized Kingdom? No, because the call for justice means we have to be there. We can't just lay back and pretend everything is perfect because we have some genuinely painful issues to deal with before we can experience the fulness of God's Kingdom. That's where prayer comes in. It's what brings things together whether it's a prayer for hope or a prayer for despair. Prayer is a reminder that God is there in relationship with us. Prayer isn't about changing God's will; it's about molding us to God's will and helping us to see the humanity in those who we struggle to accept. It's about helping us see the blessings before us. It's 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 through the eyes of God. And that's how we get to see the Kingdom. Prayer can help us see God's reign even in the midst of all our despair and all our problems.

What was Jesus trying to get the Pharisees to do? *To pray, to seek justice, and to have faith.* All of these things need to be present if we're going to experience the fulness of God's reign. The last words in our scripture lesson this morning say, "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 level playing field where everyone has the same opportunities to live life abundantly? Will he find people who are engaged in prayer? And not the kind of prayer that's always petitioning God to grant our every little self-serving wish. What will the

Son of Man find? Justice? Prayer? Faith? Barbara Lundblad, at this year's Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta Georgia preached on this passage. She said,

“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.”

As ambassadors of God's unfolding reign on earth, may we work to nurture and demonstrate all three in our lives.