

October 20, 2019 - Pentecost 19C

“Guided by Luke: The Incredibly Annoying Persistence of the Needy Believer” - Rev. Seth Jones

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Scripture - Luke 18:1-8

Jesus tells the disciples and us right up front what this parable is about today. It is about our “need to pray always and not lose heart” (18:1). It seems easy enough, but then Jesus does what he always does and throws a wrench into the gears.

Who are we supposed to identify with in this story? Am I the persistent widow? Or am I like the unjust judge? Is God like the unjust judge? Is God a persistent widow?

Jesus even asks us some questions at the end.

“And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?” (18:7).

We know the proper answer is that, of course God grants justice to those who cry out to him day and night. Just like the Hebrew people cried out to the Lord for justice while enslaved by Pharaoh, and the Lord rescued them. We are supposed to answer an enthusiastic Yes.

We know the proper answer is that God will not delay in helping his chosen people. No, we answer. He will not delay!

It kind of depends on who you are, doesn't it? Some of you have been praying for something for years, crying to the Lord day and night, with the only answer being silence, so you would answer that first question with a No. Now, we have a dilemma. Here you are in church, in fellowship with others who believe, yet with no answered prayer. Are you not chosen by the Lord then?

And from that place it sure appears the Lord is delaying his help. So we would certainly answer, Yes, indeed, the Lord delays. I have been waiting forever.

Jesus, though, assures us God is not like the unjust judge. God answers God's children, and God provides quickly. God can sure seem like an unjust judge sometimes, though. And this is certainly the complaint those who do not believe in God make all the time. Look at all the injustice in the world! What kind of God would allow all that? If there were a God, why would he delay in acting on behalf of those who suffer in separation from their families in camps on the border, those who are being bombed in stupid wars around the world, those who can barely feed their families at the end of the day?

Those are good questions, and in a way, they mirror the insistence of the widow in our story today. It also mirrors numerous places in the Psalms where the people of God question God's timing, God's apparent unwillingness to act.

Psalm 6

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.
My soul is also greatly troubled.
But you, O Lord -- How Long?

Psalm 13

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I take counsel in my soul and
have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Psalm 22

Jesus' cry from the Cross
My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.

It is important to recognize that, in the Psalms, we have a consistent witness to being demanding in our prayers to God, to be persistent. It is also worth noting that what the widow is demanding in our parable is justice.

Before we make the leap to what this all means for us, we need to take a look at a couple things going on in this parable.

First, Jesus has chosen a powerful example here. A judge in ancient Israel who refused to hear the claims of a widow would be considered a very unjust judge indeed. That judge would be perceived to, as the unjust says of himself, have no fear of God, nor any respect of persons. Widows, orphans, and those who suffered most were supposed to be 'fast-tracked' to the top of the list to receive a ruling from a judge. The Biblical command is profoundly strong that justice demanded by widows, orphans, and the least of these is to be heard and ruled upon quickly.

Why would that be? Because God acted swiftly and justly when God's orphaned and separated people demanded justice in Egypt. A judge on earth was meant to mirror the justice of the Lord on earth.

This is why this is an unjust judge in our parable. He has not acted quickly on behalf of the widow.

Second, there is another element to this story that is important. Once again, as we have seen in several parts of Scripture during our time with Luke, our gentle and sensitive natures have been protected by the genteel, paternal, white men who have translated this for us, lo those many years ago in the beginning of the Enlightenment in the early 1600s. The phrase translated as “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this woman keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming” is softened considerably for us.

In Greek, the verb for keeps bothering me is a boxing term. It means keeps giving me a black eye. I love boxing. I grew up watching boxing and still follow it. Boxing is chess played with the body and fists. An elegant boxer who plays the game well is a work of beauty. The ancient world knew this as well. Boxing was the highest art form of competition in the ancient world, and it still is today.

This verse should read something like

Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this woman keeps giving me a black eye, I will grant her justice so that she will not wear me out by continually coming into the ring and beating me up. I am on the ropes with her all the time and it shames me in front of the stadium.

The lectionary for today has paired this parable up with the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel on the shores of the River Jabbok. It is never clear in the story who Jacob is wrestling with - a man, an angel, or God. Regardless, the entity that wrestles with Jacob has the power to pass along the blessings of God to Jacob. The angel says, You have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed (Gen 32:28). Jacob is renamed “Israel” after this. Israel means one who struggles with God. Jacob believed that this was an emissary of the Lord that he named the place this happened Peniel, which means For I have seen God face to face (Gen 32:30).

How many of our struggles with God are struggles for justice? Martin Luther believed that when we were in the position of the widow, the sense that our prayers are being welcomed in silence and going unheard, we suffered from a condition of misperception. Sin, fear, anger, desire has clouded our ability to see the presence of God in the situation we are in. Likewise, in Luther’s view, there could be no such thing as this particular unjust judge, because no one in authority like this judge has the capacity to be self-aware enough to know they are apathetic to God and hate people. Instead, the judge would do what we do - wrap ourselves in layer upon layer of

self-justification for why this is what God would want, and people are getting what they deserve based on the great wisdom such a person believes they hold. This, also, is a delusion.

And so we wrestle with God. We get into the ring and keep getting up when life throws a hard left hook to the chin. Luther, the widow, and Jacob tell us something important about the ways of God, and it is one of the things Jesus is telling us. Throughout Scripture, God's justice is always with the actions of others. God does not act without acting with us. Our widow today shares the same empowerment she shows with other women of Scripture who act for the sake of God's justice - Tamar, who sets up Judah to receive the justice he was required to show her; Ruth, who creates the perfect situation in order to receive justice for the widow Naomi and herself from Boaz; Rahab at Jericho.

In each of those situations, God acts with the women in order to achieve a just outcome. Jesus' whole point is that, if God is with us and we are acting with God on behalf of God's just and right ways, would not God act as God has always acted? With quick justice and care for those whom God has claimed? Wouldn't God do that if even an unjust judge were willing to do so for the sake of our heavy-hitting, up from the mat before the bell widow? How much more so for you?

See, faith is not a question of amount, as we said a couple of weeks ago. Faith is a matter of persistence. Faith is a desire for justice. Faith is a willingness to go the full 9 rounds in the ring for the sake of what it is we are demanding from God.

Jesus ends his parable and teaching to us with another question. He asks, "Even with all this that you already know, when the Son of Man returns, where will he find faith on earth?" He asks a where question, not a how or when question.

Where is faith found? Wherever we are praying persistently that justice will be fulfilled and we know God is with us in our attempts to find justice. God works with us for justice and we are co-workers for God in the coming of justice, and in the coming of the Kingdom of God.

And so, with the widow and with God, pray persistently and do not lose heart, people of God! Amen.