

Sunday October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

Luke 18:1-8  
“Making a Pest of Yourself”

No event and certainly no story comes out of a vacuum. There is always something that prompted the creation of the story, or even more importantly for today, the remembering of the story. One of the very important questions we need to ask ourselves when we are reading and contemplating on scripture is simply this. Why this story? Why out of what were likely many stories and lessons Jesus taught, was this one persevered. Why did Luke think it important?

Well, some context may help. Back in the early church, the scattered groups of believers were becoming discouraged. They had expected Jesus to return quickly, but – so far – he hadn’t shown up. The original twelve disciples were dying off, and even the second generation of followers were getting old. Persecution had taken its toll, too. It seemed that everything Jesus had predicted had happened, and the second coming of Christ should have followed soon after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD.

But here they were, still waiting, and watching, for Jesus to come again in glory. The stories that had been told with such urgency a generation ago, were now losing their shine. Some of the details were getting fuzzy. And still, Jesus did not come. Had they missed it somehow? Had they misunderstood? Surely, they had heard him announce that there would be persecution, and they had suffered through that terrible experience.

As the church had spread from Jerusalem to Antioch, and from there along the Mediterranean coast, the people who now called themselves Christians had struggled to maintain an identity that contrasted strongly with the culture around them. Sometimes it got pretty confusing. As the number of disciples who had seen Jesus, and heard him teach, continued to dwindle, many were getting discouraged that Jesus might never return as he had promised.

In the middle of this confusion and discouragement, Luke set out to tell the whole story of the Good News, to refresh everyone’s memory, and put events into their proper perspective. He addressed a primarily Gentile audience, drawing on the stories that had been told over and over again, arranging them in an order that was designed to encourage believers to keep on believing. Luke wrote down the facts he knew, and used his best editing skills to help Christians understand those facts in the light of God’s timeline.

The Kingdom of God that had been introduced to the world in the person of Jesus Christ was already at work, but not yet fulfilled. Luke wanted his readers to know that Jesus had not broken his promise to return, but that waiting for the second coming required more than sitting around in an upper room. It meant actively participating in the work of the Kingdom. In today’s passage, Luke explains a parable of Jesus, *before* sharing the parable itself.

He only does this, two other times, when we read about the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the other is the story of the Ten Talents. But the explanation Luke gives, helps to focus our attention on the importance of staying persistently connected to God. I suggest we actually start at the end of this passage, and work our way backward to the beginning, to make sense of this parable.

Sunday October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

The question Jesus asks at the conclusion of the story actually gives us a perspective for understanding it, that we might not see, if we are in a hurry to read on to the next passage. So, let's look backward first, to reflect on the story of the persistent widow and the unjust judge from the framework this question gives us. *When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

Jesus started this particular teaching back in Chapter 17, verse 20, when the Pharisees asked him when the Kingdom of God was coming. He tells them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." Jesus often closed his teaching speeches with parables, so the story about the unjust judge and the persistent widow serves as the final close to this longer lecture about the coming of God's Kingdom on earth.

That final question makes sense, in light of this bigger picture, doesn't it? The Pharisees had asked "when?" but Jesus answers, that how we wait, is much more important than knowing the exact moment. He throws this question back at the Pharisees: when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? In other words, will we be faithful to the end? This is the crux of the matter – will Christ find faithfulness, trustworthiness, among his people when he comes again, whenever that may be?

Let's go back a step further. Before Jesus asks if we will be faithful, he assures us that *God* can always be trusted. *God* is faithful. Jesus says, "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you; he will quickly grant justice to them."

Do you notice how Luke reminds us, through the words of Jesus, of this tension the first century Christians were feeling, the tension between the expected suddenness of Christ's second coming, and the perceived delay of that event? God will not put off helping his people. But God does not operate on our timeline – we exist on his. As Peter would write to another group of early Christians, "do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."

We, today, should also be encouraged, that God *will* give justice. God will make right the things that are wrong. God will surely heal what is broken. But God's patience should not be seen as procrastination. God is showing mercy, giving us time to turn to him and seek forgiveness, to ask him to make us whole. *"And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

Recent headlines might make you wonder if it's possible. There is plenty that is wrong and broken in our world, today as much as it was over 2000 years ago. Justice sometimes seems like a dream more than a possible reality. We see disappointment and pain every day, as people are murdered, others go without food or adequate shelter, leaders turn out to be corrupt, governments stop functioning, and self-serving greed has a higher social value than generosity toward others.

The unjust judge of this parable would fit right into today's culture: he doesn't fear God, and he has no respect for people.

He models the exact opposite of the Great Commandment to love God and love neighbor. I can think of a few people in the news who sound just like this judge, and I'm sure it wouldn't take long for you to make a list, either. The judge only gives justice, to get rid of the widow's *annoyance*, not because he cares about right and wrong. "Yet because this widow keeps

Sunday October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

bothering me, I will grant her justice,” he says, “so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

What the New Revised Standard Version gives us as “wear me out” other translations offer as “shame me.” Quite literally, however, we could translate this phrase to read “so she won’t slap me in the face,” or “so she won’t give me a black eye.” I don’t think the judge is too worried about a poor widow assaulting him. No, the judge wants to avoid being embarrassed – or shamed – by the widow’s *constant badgering*. And it is that very badgering, the continual showing up on his doorstep to ask for justice, that finally allows the widow to win over the unethical judge.

Let’s take a look at that widow. Jesus says, “In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’” We don’t know who the opponent is, or what problem the widow has with the opponent. We only know that she is seeking justice. And she has her speech down to six words. Persistently, day after day, this woman kept coming to the judge, saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” What else could she do? This judge is her only hope.

You see, most women were very young, barely teenagers, when they married, so the possibility of outliving their husbands was a very strong one. There were many widows, but they weren’t necessarily old women. The problem was that they often had no means of support when their husbands died, especially if they had no sons to take responsibility for them and care for them. They did not inherit their husband’s estate – it went to another male member of the family.

If a widow stayed with her husband’s family, she became little more than a servant in the household. If she went back to her own family, the bride price had to be paid back to the husband’s family. Many times, widows were sold as slaves to pay off their husband’s debts. With all this in mind, it’s a wonder this widow even tried to seek justice. Yet here she is, day after day, relentlessly asking an unjust judge to give her justice against her opponent.

“How much more will God give justice to those who ask him?” Jesus seems to be saying. If a crooked judge can be convinced to do what is right, even if it’s for the wrong reasons, how much more will God show mercy to those he loves? And now we are back at the beginning, with the reason Luke gives us for this parable of Jesus: “*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*”

Many times, I think, we focus on the first part of that explanation, and ignore the last part. Jesus was not only teaching the disciples the importance of prayer; he was encouraging them to *not lose heart*. Jesus knew what they would each have to face after he was gone, and he wanted to be sure they were prepared for what was to come. Luke uses these words of Jesus to remind his readers, decades later, that they should also not lose heart as they wait for Christ to come again. And he wrote them down so that other believers, *centuries* later, would also be encouraged. “*And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*”

Certainly, Luke spends a lot of ink describing the importance of prayer. Jesus holds up this persistent widow as a model for effective prayer, but he isn’t talking about mindlessly repeating the same prayers over and over again. The persistence in prayer Jesus asks of us is a faithful

Sunday October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

pursuit of God's justice in the world. This widow's six-word prayer was new and fresh each time she said it.

She might have used the same words over and over, but she meant each one of them every single time, with the same intensity and focus she used from the beginning of her campaign. Can we pray like that? Praying is nothing more or less than pouring out our hearts to God, who will always be faithful to hear us. It means trusting in God, and not in ourselves. It means constantly hoping for the time when God will make things right, convinced that God's justice will prevail over evil.

Just as the widow kept coming to the judge, determined, relentless, hoping against all odds; so, we are to keep praying, determined, relentless, hoping against all odds. Not because we are "good Christians" or because our faith is strong, but because God's Holy Spirit has given us the courage to pray without ceasing in a broken and scary world, that God's Kingdom *will* come and God's will *shall* be done. If we are to be found faithful when the Son of Man comes, we must keep praying, and not lose heart.

And what is it that we should pray for? The widow gets it right. Our prayers must be for justice. Not our petty desires or what we think we need – for God already knows what we need before we ask, and many times what God knows we need and what *we think* we need are not at all the same thing. We are to pray for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done. We must not lose heart or become weary with waiting for Christ to come again to deliver us, once and for all, from the pain and brokenness we see all around us. We must persist in hope, persist in prayer, and persist in seeking justice until the Lord comes.

Christ's coming may yet be in the future, but God's patience is at work in the present. The parable assures us that God will save his people. The concern is not *when* this will happen, but its certainty, and the necessity for us to live in readiness and faithfulness.

Will Jesus come again, as he promised? Absolutely. Will God bring justice to the world? Without a doubt. Will we be faithful until that time, pursuing justice and working for the Kingdom of God? If we pray constantly, relentlessly, persistently for God to do his mighty work among us, may it be so!

So, here's the challenge. In the letter from James, we read, "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." And Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Many of you have experienced the power of prayer in your lives. I have heard stories of people in this church coming together to pray, and the way God answered those prayers. Can you think of a time in our history when we needed prayer more than we do now? The needs I see in this town are so great, and there is so little help available to meet those needs. People struggle to make ends meet, to battle addiction, to find purpose and meaning in their lives. The greatest need I see is for Jesus to be Lord, for God's love to be made known to people who have never experienced it. Isn't that something worth praying for? Isn't that something worth praying *together* for?

I found an old Franciscan benediction that spells this out beautifully.

*May God bless you with discomf*

Sunday October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

*At easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships  
So that you may live deep within your heart*

*May God bless you with anger  
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,  
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May God bless you with tears  
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,  
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them  
To turn their pain into joy.*

*And may God bless you with enough foolishness  
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,  
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done  
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.*

*Amen.*