

Sunday, August 21, 2022

A Persistent Community

(Series: “Stories of Jesus” – The Widow and Unjust Judge)

(Message Ten)

(Luke 18:1-8)

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ²He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”

⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

Message:

Most people, maybe all people, at one time or another, pray. And many—who knows how many?—quit.

And why shouldn’t they? If they don’t get what they ask for; if they don’t get what they think of as an “answer,” why keep at it?

The remarkable thing about prayer is not that so many people pray – we’ll try almost anything when our needs mount and we’re in a crisis – but that some of us keep at it.

Why do we keep praying when we have so little to show for it? We all have examples of prayers we’ve prayed that lack the answers we sought. Prayer often seems like a leaky bucket – we go to the river to get a pail of water and by the time we get home the water is gone, the bucket empty, and all we have left for our effort is a damp trail the sun will soon dry up.

The early Christians looked at prayer differently than we do today. Throughout the Gospels, we have very little teaching of Jesus on prayer – he never stopped along the way to hold a seminar on intercession, never preached on it to the crowds. God-followers in Jesus’ day - focused on prayer throughout the day - as they traveled, as they were preparing, as they were following, as they were coming and going.

Prayer was not an abstraction to be studied; prayer was a practice to be engaged that was embedded in persons and places and times in the daily living of life. It was written deeply in their DNA. Jesus prayed continuously. Prayer became integral to “the Jesus Way.”

Prayer was never considered optional; it was understood to be fundamentally necessary for everyone’s life at all times and in every circumstance.

I suspect most of us this morning know *about* prayer, but that few of us are actually consistent, *persistent* pray-ers. Prayer times are seldom well-attended. The average believer prays less than five minutes a day.

While my parents taught me to pray shortly after I could talk, my prayer life didn’t really began to grow until I took a course at Fuller Theological Seminary and had to spend days in the desert with literally nothing else to do but pray.

Since then, I’ve had the privileges of serving as the denominational prayer mobilizer, teaching prayer at Calvin Seminary and around the denomination, serving on the National Prayer Committee and writing a book on prayer.

But the truth is, I am still learning to pray; I have just touched the surface of the depths of prayer. I’m still trying to integrate it more fully in my daily life.

So, this parable Jesus tells in **Luke 18** continues to **challenge** and **encourage** me – as I hope it will you.

STRUCTURE

This parable offers a very *simple* structure: sort of a 1,2,1,2. There is a short contextual perspective from Luke, followed by a 1,2,1,2 rhythm We are introduced to a judge [1], then a widow [2], then back to the judge [1], and concluding with the widow [1]. That is followed by a short conclusion or ***nimsal*** (more on this later).

STORY

Luke begins by telling his readers *why* Jesus was telling this story. He writes, “*Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*” (18:1)

If you mount a green and brown picture in a brown frame, the brown frame will highlight the browns in the picture. If the brown frame is removed and the picture is placed directly on a green wall, the greens in the picture will be highlighted. Same picture – yet it seems quite different. In the west, we often remove the first century “frame” from the parables and then consciously or unconsciously we place the picture (parable) on a green (Western) wall.

Here Luke gives us a first century “frame”: *“This story is told to motivate us to pray and never give up.”* (His first century insight is superior to any modern-day commentator.) So how does this parable motive us to pray and never give up?

The parable presents a contrasting ignoble villain (a judge) and a noble hero (a widow).

This widow is not a wealthy, educated, CEO with endless resources (Being a widow today in our western culture actually says very little about their social and financial status in life, except that their husband has died.)

In Jesus’ day, however, a **widow** was the classic symbol of the most **vulnerable** in society. You could assume a widow was poor, unemployable; void of power, status and connection; fully dependant on others; a social outcast (like today’s bag lady).

In Middle Eastern society, women do not go to court; men go for them. When this widow steps in the courtroom, you know she has no father, uncle, brother, son or nephew to speak for her. She is all **alone**.

Jesus is adding her to his list of outcasts: a Samaritan, a tax collector, a rebellious son, and now a woman. The shock is that she becomes the hero in this story.

This widow is being harassed by a local **villain**. While we’re not told how he harasses her, he was working her over and, as a result, she has no means to protect herself. She has no resources or connections in her time of need. She is in a tough spot. Her only recourse, her one hope, is to go before this judge and plead her case. Maybe the judge will offer her the protection she desperately needs?

The **judge** is described by Jesus (**18:2**) – *“There was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought.”* He is consumed with himself.

In the Middle East’s shame and pride culture, social behavior is largely guided by the community’s sense of honor, chivalry, and shame, even more than a sense of right and wrong.

So the primary way of appeal for someone’s help is to their **sense of honor**.

But you can't say to this judge, "*for the sake of God*," because he doesn't fear God, doesn't have any moral absolutes, or doesn't have any sense of an ultimate accounting. Nor can you say to him, "*for my sake*," because he doesn't care what anyone thinks; he abuses the people who come to his courtroom; and he sees people as interruptions in his day—problems to be dismissed; headaches and hassles to be dispensed of.

The bottom line is you can't appeal to this judge; it is a **waste** of one's **time**. The widow's situation appears hopeless – a continually harassed widow whose only hope is a judge who doesn't care. We might say, "*She doesn't have a prayer!*"

But the widow appears in his court, **pleads her case, and throws herself on the **mercy** of the court.**

"Judge, I don't need any favors, I just need you to protect my rights. You are my only hope. Please, judge, stop this villain from harassing me."

You guessed it. The judge dismisses her: "*Why should I bother with you, woman? You can't do anything for me. Get her out of here; throw her out on the street. Next!*" He becomes her **second villain**.

She is left with only one option – her loud and persistent **pleading** and **pestering**.

Out on the street, she gathers her wits and puts together a plan: "*With no one to protect me, no money or power, he is my only hope. I need him to change his mind.*"

So... "*I'll persist. I'll pester him until he gives me protection or puts me in jail. Every time he turns around, I'll be there. I will be his worst nightmare. I'll be on him like a shirt. I'll pound on his door in the middle of the night. I'll follow him to work, to the mall, to the country club (I'm embellishing the text just a little here ☺) until he relents.*"

Ken Bailey tells of a violent militia that moved its headquarters to a few blocks from where he lived in Beirut. Heavily armed men guarded the entrance. The community did not "see" them or engage in conversation with them.

But there was an old woman in a long black dress who would walk up to the building, stand out front, shake her finger at the guards and shout invectives at them to move out of the neighborhood. The guards would smile, address her politely, and tell her not to get upset.

If a man had done what she did, he would have been shot.

(It is not an accident that the women disciples followed Jesus to the cross. If the men disciples had come, they likely would have been arrested. John, being young and protected by Mary, was the lone exception who proves the rule.)

A man would have been thrown out, arrested, and scourged for his pestering. But this widow can manage if she has courage and persistence.

So, day in and day out, this widow **refuses** to be quiet or go away silently. And her persistent pestering **works**! I picture this judge storming into his office one day screaming: "*Will someone take care of this woman?! She is driving me nuts.*" And someone does! Finally!

The case is settled in her favor. The story ends happily.

So the moral of this story would seem to be "*It pays to pester.*" That is, pestering may be the only way to get what you need from someone who is indisposed to give it. But since Luke tells us this is about getting people to pray, we have to ask the question, "*What does this story say about prayer?*"

Through our **western** eyes, we often view this story as an **allegory**. We're like the widow: **weak**, powerless, abandoned, **hopeless**, no status or connections and facing the major problems and difficulties in our lives.

That leaves **God** to be like the **judge**. (Well, maybe not exactly; it is not a great fit...but how else would it work?)

And, you know, God is busy spinning the planets, supervising wars, and controlling the weather. With all the problems he deals with, we probably shouldn't bother him unless it's important stuff. But if it's important, we can get his attention like the widow did: just pester him.

We can get down on our knees, fast, hold prayer meetings, coordinate our friends to pester (the more the better), and we try to wear God down so he will eventually cry out: "*I am so tired of hearing from so-and-so. Gabriel, Michael, you fix this.*"

Are you buying this? I hope not. But, sadly, many people do...

Many who say they believe in Christ - don't pray. Their reason: "*I don't have the energy. Prayer just **wears** me out.*" "*It doesn't work. God is going to do what he is going to do anyway.*" Many people believe prayer is like the widow pestering the judge - constantly pleading with God to open a hole in heaven so he can release some of the blessings that he has there but is hesitant to share.

But this is not an allegory. This is a cleverly communicated study in contrasts.

Jesus' listeners are scratching their heads: "*We're **not** at all **like** the widow.*"

The widow was forgotten, abandoned, and had **no** connections or **status**. That's not who the Bible says we are. We are **children** of God; we are members of his family.

Don't ever give up on prayer because you think you are penniless, powerless, nameless, faceless or forgotten. You are a child of God.

In high school, I'd could walk into the office, past the office staff, and right into the principal's office. Students had to be ushered in; teachers had to knock. I just walked right in...I was a son.

My sons have my cell phone number. They call; I answer. I walk out of meetings. I once stopped teaching at a prayer conference to assist my son caught in a white-out. They are not an interruption in my life...they are my life.

Please understand this: No one's voice sounds sweeter to God than your voice. If you really understand this, it will motivate you to pray. You may currently be out of touch, messed up, at odds with God, but you still matter to God and he still longs to hear your voice.

If you're in Christ, you're in a **favored** position; you're not like the widow; you are a son; you are a daughter. He loves hearing from you.

Don't ever view yourself as poor, helpless, hopeless, abandoned—or prayer will be a struggle. You are family. You have direct access to God.

And hopefully, Jesus' listeners also walked away and said, "*Our God is **not like that judge.***" This judge is **unrighteous**, unfair, disrespectful, uncaring; our God, Scripture says, is good, **righteous**, holy, sympathetic, gracious, kind and tender toward his children.

You do not need to devise a way to **pester** God in order to pry God's **blessings** from him. All of Scripture underscores that God cares for and loves to bless his children. It is his nature. He is a God who loves to give good things to his children.

Always remember that we are **not like the widow and God is **not** like the Judge.**

SUMMARY

Jewish tradition expected a parable would be accompanied by a **nimsal (a bit of additional information added at the end so the listener can better understand the story).**

Sometimes Jesus omits this (e.g., the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast, **Luke 13:18-21**), sometimes he offers additional information only to his disciples (cf. Parable of the Sower, **Luke 8:9f**;) and sometimes he shares it with everyone (cf. like our story for next week – The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, **Luke 18:9-14**).

This *nimsal* – "*And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see*

that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” – suggests prayer and faith are together the major thrust of this parable.

*“Will he find **faith** on earth?” is the same as asking, “Will men and women still be **praying**, still have a relationship with Jesus, still not have given up, still not have lost heart?”*

This faith is not an abstraction, but a way of life expressed in persistent prayer. Faith in God is the **basis** of prayer; prayer is the **barometer** of our faith – our relationship with God.

The word “faith” here is preceded by a definite article. It is “THE faith.” The faith that sticks with Jesus as he welcomes followers into his kingdom...

Those who persevere have learned to stick it out by praying what they live and living what they pray. They have learned how to embrace God’s often silent presence.

In spite of the world’s circumstances and God’s apparent silence, we are to mimic the widow, to **persevere and to not lose heart. **Why** do we do it?**

First, we keep praying because **we know** who **God** is and what he is like.

He is a God who creates, a God who acts, a God who saves, a God who calls people to **give witness** to his word and deeds. In story after story, we are reminded our God is a good God, a rescuing God, a gracious God. We never get the full story or see the full picture – it is simply too large to comprehend (a god we can understand is not much of a God).

Words like *steadfast love, faithfulness, blessing, forgiving, gracious* define our God. The Psalm declares – “*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love...*” (**Psalm 103:8**)

The unjust judge in our story is **everything** we know our **God** is **not**! We keep company with our God, we know his character, and so we keep praying and do not lose heart.

Second, we keep praying because this kingdom business is **urgent business**.

Kingdom is not a concept that comes up for discussion every now and then; kingdom is what is going on all the time (whether we are aware of it or not). It is Jesus’ mission to make us **aware** of it, to have it **renovate** our imagination and to reset our worldview so we can fully **participate** in it.

Jesus frequently uses the term “kingdom” as a metaphor for the all-inclusive work of God’s rule. Persistent prayer is the only kind of prayer consistent with a kingdom understanding of how God works in time and space.

The Pharisees sitting on the sidelines want to know, “*When are we going to see this kingdom? Show us.*”

Jesus says, “*Right now. Anytime. It’s **right here**. You are in it. Want to see it more clearly? Start praying. **Keep praying!***”

God is urgently and radically re-imagining what we understand it means to follow Jesus and participate in the establishment of his kingdom. If we want to be a part of that kingdom, we need to keep praying.

Third, we keep praying because **God keeps working** and we want to be in on that work.

In Jesus’ day, leaders with a strategy to get rid of the Romans came and went as the Romans snuffed them out. Jesus also announced deliverance from the evil opposition and corruption in the Temple.

But his kingdom would not come through bloody violence but through **sacrifice, suffering**, rejection. And one day when the Kingdom comes in its fullness, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus, crucified and risen, is Lord.

Meanwhile, it is a faith-life, a praying life, that participates here and now, in this world and our life, in God’s Kingdom. So we pray and do not lose heart because it is God’s Kingdom and we long to be a **part** of it.

In the end, will he **find you faithful?**

Prayer:

Father, thank you for not being like the unjust judge. Thank you for being a Father who loves to give good things to his children.

Thank you that we are not like the lonely widow who needs to pester the judge for justice. Thank you for embracing us as sons and daughters and welcoming us into your family because of Jesus.

Father, we confess that do not pray as we ought. Encourage us to spend more time acknowledging who you are; make us increasingly aware of your Kingdom’s presence and equip us for active participation in your work.

In the name of Jesus our Teacher and Rabbi, Amen.