

Sermon 10/20/2019

Jesus knew that his followers would live in tension between two worlds. That is still true. The Bible says that our citizenship is now in God's kingdom. And our values and priorities and relationships now reflect the character and the values of God. But our bodies are still living in this world—a world full of evil, a world in which people neither fear God nor care for their fellow humans. Jesus knew that his followers were going to get knocked down over and over again. That's just the way society is. How could he convince them to get back up and keep going?

He told them this parable to show them that they should always look to the future and never give up. The *Gospel* reading today about the persistent widow and the unjust judge is actually part of a larger teaching that is all about the kingdom—the Realm—of God. To understand this story in Luke 18, we have to go back to the end of Luke, chapter 17. In Luke 17: 20-37, Jesus warns his followers that the kingdom of God is coming and they need to be prepared because most people will not be ready for it. We will be in the middle of our ordinary, busy lives, and the kingdom of God will suddenly be here. And then we get to Luke 18, which begins—“*Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*”

The parable is about a poor widow. In Jesus' day, widows were left destitute. If their family or their community didn't look out for them, they were in trouble. The very word for “widow” in Hebrew literally means “*one who is silent.*” Widows didn't have a “voice” in their society. And this widow is in trouble. She has been wronged, and she goes to court seeking justice.

But the judge is heartless, self-centered. He's practically a psychopath! He cares only for himself. What is right is defined by what pleases *him*—“*...I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone.*” In other words, “I'm not influenced by anyone...not even God.” No morality...and no compassion.

The judge is a good example of our fallen world. Our world doesn't respect God or show much compassion for the weak and needy. And this corrupt judge has *all* the power over this needy woman's life.

The poor widow is a picture of all those believers who are holding on to their faith in a corrupt and unjust world; who are praying to know God's will, to hear God's voice; who are praying for mercy and enough grace to get through another day. And Jesus is saying, “Don't stop praying. Don't stop believing that God can and will give you justice. Don't give up on the kingdom of God, because it's coming.

In this account, Jesus makes a sharp contrast between the judge and God—God is not being *likened* to an unjust judge but *contrasted* with one. If a scumbag like this judge will come to the help of a persistent woman, how much more will God speedily come to the help of his people. It's an extreme version of what (on another occasion) Jesus said about parents responding to a child's request for a fish or an egg to eat. Remember how he said that if parents know how to give good things to their kids, how much more will God answer our prayers.

Jesus is not telling us to keep nagging like that unfortunate woman. In our need we cry aloud to God; not because the louder we cry the more likely we are to be heard, but simply because we are in distress. In our misery it is the most natural thing to cry out for God's help. Longer prayers, louder prayers, repetitious prayers do not make them more efficacious. Quantity, or volume are not some kind of bargaining chip with God. Relentlessly nagging God does not make prayer more effective. That is definitely not the point of the parable. The thing Jesus wants us to get is the contrast between

God and the unjust judge: "...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." We are not like the widow who must wait for hours or days, weeks or months, until her nagging wears the scumbag judge down. God quickly responds to our cry for help.

Does that fit with actual experience? It does not appear to be as obvious as we would like. At this moment while we sit comfortably here, there are the most fervent prayers—the most agonizing prayers—rising from the face of this planet. Yet for many, their prayers do not seem to be answered. Parents cry out to God for the healing of their diseased children. Children pray to God for the healing of their parents. Many beg for the restoring of broken relationships. Prisoners of conscience, and their loved ones, pray for release. Victims of torture are begging for a speedy death. Thousands are praying for the overthrow of tyrants. Millions are begging for the end of all warfare. The dispossessed and the persecuted are crying out for justice. Starving people are pleading for food for themselves and their little ones. The mentally ill are begging for peace of mind. (And that is just for starters! The list could go on for hours.) Yet in the majority of these situations God does not appear to speedily come to the rescue of those who cry out in prayer. It does not seem so.

Does that mean that Jesus got it wrong...or does it mean that God does answer speedily but we do not comprehend the working of God's ways? First of all, Jesus commands us to pray. Prayer is the bridge between this sinful world and the kingdom of God. In *Matthew 6*, verse 8, Jesus says that God knows what we need even before we ask him. So what is the purpose of prayer?

Prayer puts us in the presence of God. Prayer may or may not change our circumstances, but it changes us. Prayer helps us to see this world, to think about this world, to respond to this world the way God would. Prayer gives us strength and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, a strength and wisdom that give us an eternal perspective on our current circumstances. And persistent prayer reminds us that God is working in this world whether we see the results or not.

Speaking for myself, I have cried out to God many times and the answer has not appeared to come. Yet I stake my life on Jesus. We are never forsaken. The heavens may seem deaf to our cries but God hears us, even before the cry for help leaves our mouth. God is present, experiencing our pain and distress, and with aching fingers God is weaving something good and beautiful out of the loose and tangled strands of existence. Jesus is the guarantor of this.

So what about our poor widow? Jesus notes that she kept coming back day after day. She kept demanding justice until her persistence wore the judge out. It says in verse 5: "*Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!*" What we read as "*because this widow keeps bothering me,*" is literally saying "*because she continually whacks me in the eye.*" Don't you just love that turn of phrase? For example, if we are being pestered we sometimes say: "Get out of my face!" Luke says "*because she continually whacks me in the eye.*" So, perhaps, we could translate things this way—*Hear what the scumbag of a judge says: "Though I don't give a damn for God or man, because this woman keeps getting in my face, I will rule in her favor; otherwise she will give me ulcers with her continual nagging."* Colorful language? Yes, for sure. But the language of Jesus was the colorful language of the common folk.

This widow has no power whatsoever in her society. But she has faith in the Almighty God. She refuses to give up. And her faith is so powerful it's like a punch in

the eye to this corrupt judge. Even though HE has all the power—as the world measures power—he is powerless in the face of this woman of God.

Prayer is the tool God gave us to set us free from the values, priorities and powers of this world. The poor widow in our parable had no power against the unjust judge. Yet she wasn't afraid. She wasn't afraid to demand the justice due her. She wasn't afraid to stand up to his apathy and corruption. Her faith in a just God gave her the courage and determination to persevere.

We, too, can persist because we have a God who keeps His promises. And God promises that we will see justice and mercy when Jesus returns to establish the kingdom of God on earth. We are living between a world of righteousness, peace and joy, and a world of injustice, evil and suffering. And the only thing that keeps us going is the certainty of God's faithfulness, the certainty of God's love. How do we keep from giving up?

Pray! And God promises that our faithfulness will be rewarded. And what is that reward? We will have the power to endure now, and have the joy of seeing justice and restoration when God's kingdom finally comes.