

October 29, 2017

"A Divine Twist"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 18:1-8

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Today's scripture lesson starts out simple enough, doesn't it? Jesus told his disciples a parable about how "they should always pray and never lose heart." That one sentence basically sums it all up. Simply and concisely stated. They should always pray and never lose heart. Now what's unique here is that the point of the parable, the lesson to be learned so to speak, is right at the very beginning of the story, rather than at the end like most parables. Why? Well, maybe Jesus had a very busy appointment calendar that day and needed to get his point across quickly. Perhaps his day was filled with things he had to get done, like meet with some Pharisees to debate the merits of healing on the Sabbath. Or speak at a luncheon on the topic, "Why stoning should be banned as capital punishment." Or more likely, he may have just wanted to get out there and spread the good news of the Kingdom of God to the poor, suffering, weak and oppressed. Whatever the reason, the parable is short and the point is directly expressed. We are to pray always... and never lose heart.

But if I know anything about my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, there's a lot more here than meets the eye, or the ear for that matter. For Jesus really tells his disciples a little gem of a story. First, it's a man/woman story no less. You know, there are only so many basic themes storytellers can use to develop their plots. Things like man against nature, man against himself, man against society. But the one that always seems to get the most attention is the story of man against woman. Probably for many reasons, but partly, I think because of all the differences there are between men and women. I'll give you some simple examples. For instance, 1) Take eating out. When men go out together, say, Larry, Milt and Steve, and their cute young waitress arrives with the bill, they'll dig deep and each throw in \$20, even though the bill is only \$39.50. And none of them will admit to the waitress that they want change back. But when women go out together, and their bill arrives, out comes the calculators. 2) When it comes to shopping, a man will never use a coupon and he'll pay \$2 for a \$1 item he needs. A woman, on the other hand, will use a coupon to pay \$1 for a \$2 item that she doesn't need. 3) Consider how men and women look at the future – a woman always worries about it until she gets a husband. A man never worries about the future until he gets a wife. 4) Take public restrooms. Men use them for biological purposes. Women use them as social lounges. 5) And, finally, children. A woman knows all about her children. She knows about dentist appointments, best friends, favorite foods, secret fears and hopes and dreams. A man is only vaguely aware of some 'short people' living in the house.

So with that as some background, let's turn to the story Jesus tells today about a man and a woman. Now Jesus makes this story even more interesting because it's about a really powerful man, who's used to getting his way, versus a really vulnerable woman, who's used to submitting to power and authority. That's a story that certainly has made the news recently. In this case, though, the woman is a helpless widow. Back in biblical times, being a widow was an extreme hardship for a woman. Inheritance laws were such that, if she had no family willing to take her in, there was no other support system, and she was left to fend for herself. Which was a very desperate state of affairs in a patriarchal society. She was probably old, poor, weak, and would have had no stature at all in the community. As for the judge, Jesus says, "There was a judge in a certain city who neither feared God nor cared about people." Wow! Just imagine what kind of a person he had to be – not fearing God or people. He had to have been somewhat of a tyrant, full of self-pride and arrogance. Think about the power he must have wielded. People probably feared him and therefore he always got his way. Jesus couldn't present two more contrasting types, could he? Just think of every adjective you could use to describe the judge, and the widow's the exact opposite. And yet, Jesus says, this widow kept coming to this difficult judge, banging on his door, pleading, "Grant me justice." "Grant me my request." And for a long while the judge refuses to even acknowledge or answer her. But she persistently, tirelessly, earnestly continues banging at his door, making her request known to the judge until he finally says to himself, "This woman keeps bothering me, so I'm going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests." And so the bottom line... that helpless, yet persistent widow finally got what she wanted from that all-powerful man.

Now we might be tempted to sit here satisfied, thinking, "That was a good story all by itself," because we all love happy endings, especially when the underdog wins. But then Jesus goes a step further and adds the spiritual icing on the cake, so to speak, when he basically says – "Look at what that unjust judge did. If even he will grant a request, will not our God grant the same to his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night." And this is good news for us, because you see, none of us are weaker than the widow. None of us are facing longer odds than she. None of us are as lowly or as helpless. Yet because of her determination and faith, that powerful judge gave her what she wanted. And when we think of God, we see that time and time again throughout Scripture God gives unwavering generosity and grace and love to all his children. So at this point, we may think to ourselves, "I understand, I get the point, we are to pray persistently, tirelessly, earnestly, just like the widow, and never lose heart. Because we can be assured our perfectly just God will answer our prayers if we keep at it." Yes, this is

the kind of encouragement we need to stay diligent in our prayer life. And now we all might be tempted to say, "What a nice parable. The End!"

(Very long pause) But you know something else is coming, don't you? Jesus doesn't tell a parable like this unless he, perhaps wants to enlighten us with another, even more important, point. So, I want you to consider this: what if the parable isn't making the obvious comparison between the unjust judge and our righteous heavenly Father? What if there is some deeper message hidden in this parable. Any ideas? Well, here's a thought. Suppose there's a divine twist, so to speak. Suppose for just a moment it's really the poor pleading widow that represents God in this parable. Yes, what if the widow is God. And each one of us, is that prideful and arrogant judge. What if we are the judge that neither fears God nor cares for people. What if we are a judge who wants everything the way we want it, and therefore we ignore God, not allowing God to come into our lives with a request that we do something, or change something. What if we are a judge who ignores other people, not wanting them to come and complicate our lives with their problems and needs. Let me explain. Can you think of times in your life when you were angry or resentful, holding on to that grudge, yet deep down in your heart, it bothered you, knowing you should have been more forgiving and just let it go. That was God, like the widow, pleading with you to grant her request to offer mercy. Are you estranged with some family member or friend, and it gnaws at you? That could be God, like the widow beseeching you to seek reconciliation. Are you sometimes insensitive to the needs of others, less generous or compassionate than you should be, and you feel those pangs of guilt? Perhaps that is God, like the widow, asking you to be more loving. Have you ever done something that you know goes outside the bounds of Christian behavior, and you try to justify your actions, but something inside just doesn't feel right? That's God, like the widow, urging you to repentance and change. Have you caused someone pain or sorrow, and try as you might to ignore it, it keeps bothering you. Well, there's God, like the widow, requesting that you ask forgiveness. You see, I'm afraid there is an unjust judge in each one of us. And there is God, like the widow, pleading with us for mercy and justice and righteousness. Pleading with us to love, to serve, to follow his way, while we try our best to ignore him and put him off. That's why Jesus ended this lesson with the question, "When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth?" In other words, will he find that we did in fact, answer his persistent requests? Will he?

Yes, this little gem of a story actually delivers two messages. The obvious one is about our need to pray always, and never lose heart. But then an even more important one. You see, Jesus once said, "I stand

at the door and knock.” “I stand at the door and knock.” Can you hear him? “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come unto him.” God, through Jesus Christ will never give up on us. He will continue to knock and knock and knock, persistently, tirelessly, earnestly, with determination, until we let him in our life, our heart, our soul. And when we finally accept his invitation, it will not be because we are just or deserve it. It will be because at some point like that unjust judge, we will not be able to put off any longer the transforming love, mercy and grace of God Almighty. And at that moment, our greatest prayer will indeed be answered. Thanks be to God! Amen.