

July 26, 2020

“The Persistent Widow”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 18:1-8

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

We've been looking at the parables of Jesus this summer, and I think at first glance, we might find today's Parable of the Persistent Widow to be pretty straightforward. Very uncomplicated, don't you think? In fact, St. Luke tells us right up front what Jesus' intent is in this parable. That is...to show our need to always pray. And, equally important, not to lose heart when we pray.

But let's explore it a little further. Jesus, being the perfect story teller, uses comparison and contrast, to tell us about a poor widow, and a powerful judge. First, the poor widow. Two thousand years ago in Palestine, widows were among the weakest and most vulnerable groups in society. Today we might compare their wretched situation to that of some of the homeless people we see in our cities and towns. Men and women who have little or no support systems. Who bed down in some alleyway in a cardboard box, wear ragged and dirty clothes, and don't know where their next meal or shower is coming from. Or perhaps we could make a comparison with young children living in an inner-city project with no father around, and a junkie for a mother, and these kids have to somehow survive, struggling to get through life alone, facing a hopeless future. Yes, that was the plight of widows back then. That's why anyone who heard the parable and had a heart, would have felt empathy for the poor widow Jesus described. Then, on the opposite end of the spectrum, Jesus described a powerful judge. One who fears neither God nor respects anyone. There are powerful people we can all think of today who show that same kind of arrogance and pridefulness – politicians, news anchors, Hollywood stars, sports stars who fit that description. People who consider themselves above the laws that govern righteous and moral conduct. Yes, there are many, then and now, who are unconcerned about the plight or condition of the commonplace people around them. So Jesus couldn't have presented two more contrasting types, could he? A poor widow and a powerful judge. And yet surprisingly, the poor, weak widow eventually receives all that she desired. How? By constantly, earnestly, beseechingly, tenaciously, persistently, coming to the judge and pleading her case. And that's the lesson Jesus is trying to teach us today about prayer. That if even an unrighteous, prideful and callous judge will give a powerless widow her due justice, how much more, how much, much, more will our loving and compassionate and generous God give us? How much more will God give us, if we just come to Him constantly, earnestly, beseechingly, tenaciously, persistently in prayer?

However, in truth, we don't. And that in a nut shell is really the issue Jesus is addressing. Our regularity and commitment to prayer. You know, it seems like prayer should be so simple, but it's not. And there is so much to say about prayer, and the value of prayer, that frankly, it's difficult to know where to begin. So I want to share with you a few things about prayer that I feel is very important. First, and foremost, why should we pray? Well, because Jesus did! Because Jesus did! That really says it all. If the Son of God prayed regularly, why do we so frequently disregard the practice? That's a good question to ponder. Now, I've also found that the secret to effective prayer, is putting aside the time to pray. Devoting time for silence and prayer is essential in order to find the sacred center of our being. For consider all the chaos and distraction that surrounds us in this day and age. It's only when we put aside those distractions, will we find the peace and silence we need to talk to God and to listen to God. Mother Teresa said that silence moves us to prayer, which moves us to love, which moves us to serve. And what better example than Mother Teresa when it comes to serving the Lord. Here's another thing. I've heard it said that prayer is a conversation between good friends – you and Jesus. Now just think – with a good friend you can be honest about your thoughts and concerns. Honest with your emotions, be they good or bad. Because you trust your friend to understand you and to help you sort things out. That's the way it is with our Lord. He understands. Trust me, God has very thick skin and broad shoulders. So you don't have to be afraid to bring anything to him. Anything! I'm reminded of the story about a woman whose husband was suffering and dying. For months she stayed with him at the hospital – a Catholic hospital, named after the Virgin Mary. One day, out of anger and desperation, she went out to the statue of Mary situated in a small garden in the front of the hospital and started to throw dirt and stones and branches, and whatever she could find, at the statue. The security people tried to stop her, but the hospital's chaplain intervened. "Don't stop her," he said, "she's praying." And finally, C.S. Lewis said, "I pray because I'm (basically) helpless. I pray because need flows out of me all the time. Prayer doesn't change God. It changes me." Now in case you need a primer on prayer, during both good and bad times in your life, including times of anger and trouble and frustration, just read the Book of Psalms. It's all there.

Yes, today's parable seems, like I said, to be pretty straightforward. Jesus tells us the importance to always pray and to never lose heart when we pray. But... but he could have just told us that directly couldn't he? Instead he told a parable about an unjust judge and a humble widow. So you know there has to be much more to it. Perhaps a divine twist so to speak. And so, once again, anyone with ears... listen. Really listen! Now in most of Jesus' parables, he takes the prime mover in the story's plot, the

person making all the decisions and creating the action, and draws a comparison to that of God. Like the landowner in last week's parable who generously took all the workers out of the marketplace and gave them a denarius. That was God. Or, like the sower who spreads his seeds, his words and promises, on all people. That, too, was God. But, this parable has to be different. Because I don't think Jesus would compare God to an unjust judge. So, who then might be God in the parable? Well, think about it. Suppose, for a moment that the widow, in fact, represents God.¹ The widow being God, constantly, earnestly, beseechingly, tenaciously, persistently, trying to change the attitudes and actions of the unjust judge. And the unjust judge. Who might he be? That person, brothers and sisters, is you and me. Each one of us, is that judge. A judge who many times neither fears God nor has respect for people. A judge whose arrogance and pride leaves little room for God to change us and make us better people. A judge with no heart to serve others with their problems and needs. A judge who doesn't pray. The parable is beginning to make perfect sense now, isn't it?

Because think of your own life a minute. Is there a persistent knocking at the door of your heart you need to answer? Are you feeling angry, frustrated, fearful, over the pandemic and the unrest in our country, and something inside just doesn't feel right? That may be God, like the widow, banging on your door, pleading with you to look to him for answers, for peace, for comfort, for the assurance that "this too will pass." Is there an issue in your life with a relationship that needs to be addressed, and you try to deny or ignore it, but still it keeps coming up? That could be God banging on your door wanting to help you resolve the situation with his mercy, forgiveness and love. Do you feel a yearning that there's something missing in your life, an emptiness you can't seem to fill that's causing you to search and question your life and purpose? Maybe that's God banging on your door wanting you to invite him in to fill that void and bring you his wisdom and purpose. Have you done something that you know is outside the bounds of Christian behavior, and you try to justify your actions, but something keeps gnawing at your heart? That's God banging at your door urging you to repentance and change. Yes, there is an unjust judge in each one of us. And there is God, constantly, earnestly, beseechingly, tenaciously, persistently coming to us, pleading his case. Pleading with us to change our attitudes and actions so that we might fill this world with love and peace and joy and hope and mercy, and, yes, justice.

¹ R. Grace Imathiu, *Words of Fire, Spirit of Grace*

See now – this little gem of a parable actually delivers two messages. The obvious one is about our need to pray always and never lose heart. To take everything to God in prayer – just like Jesus did. But there's also the message that God is at our door. Jesus once said, "I stand at the door and knock." Can you hear him? "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come to him." God will not give up. He will continue to knock and knock and knock, persistently, until we let him in our life and our hearts. And when we finally accept his invitation of peace and joy and love, it will not be because we are just or deserve it. But it will be because at some point like that unjust judge, we will not be able to put off any longer the transforming grace of Almighty God. And at that moment, we will realize that our deepest and most longing prayers will have indeed been answered. Thanks be to God. Amen.