

The Widow and the Unjust Judge

Jeremiah 31:27-34 and Luke 18:1-18

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Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Since the beginning of September, we have been making our way through Luke's gospel, story by story, miracle by miracle.

And today we find ourselves at the beginning of chapter 18, and what is unusual about this is that Jesus tells them at the beginning what the parable is going to be about. He doesn't do that very often, if ever, but he does it here, perhaps because he doesn't want there to be any misunderstanding.

Let's listen...for God's word to us.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

This is an odd and troubling time in the world, don't you think? The last year has felt odd and troubling, sometimes deeply disturbing.

I led devotions for the elders last week at our October Council meeting, and I confessed to them that right now I find myself discouraged and faltering in a spiritual way. I find it difficult some days to keep going, to remain optimistic about the future, even to imagine a future.

On Tuesday night I mentioned, as an example, the presidential election in the U.S., and I said to them that I find it deeply discouraging. Depressing. I am embarrassed. When people find out that I am an American, they almost always say, **“Do you think Donald Trump has a chance?”**

But the presidential election in the U.S. is not the only troubling situation in the world. Every day, it seems more bad news comes out of Syria. The city of Aleppo, once the largest city in that country, once a city with more than two million inhabitants, is now being reduced to rubble. And 200,000 people – maybe more – are trapped inside, unable to get food and water, unable to get out. It’s a terrible situation.

And I know from a few of you, who come from other countries around the world, that there are other situations of desperation and fighting and civil war.

Most of you know by now, I think, that sermon preparation for me begins early in the week. I read the verses I’ve chosen for the following Sunday, and then for several days I think about them, I brood over them, I turn them over and over again in my mind.

So, the parable you heard today, the one about the persistent widow and the unjust judge – this parable has been on my mind all week long – **“pray always and do not lose heart.”**

Just the word I needed to hear, right? Be persistent. In your prayers, don’t take no for an answer. Stay with it, even when things look hopeless and bleak. Because even good-for-nothing judges, like the one in the parable, sometimes change their minds. No situation is ever beyond God’s reach.

Jesus, as I say just about every week, was a master story-teller. The fact that we’re still telling his stories some 2,000 years later is a clue that he knew how to engage an audience. And he spoke about issues that we still think about, that still matter to us.

In this story – or parable – Jesus sets things up almost as a caricature. I have never seen this in Zurich – too frivolous for the Swiss, I suppose – but on the streets in Paris there are caricature artists. And for a lot of money, they will draw a picture of you with a large head and a small body. And all of your features are exaggerated. And because they like to get paid, they try not to be mean about it.

Anyway, the way Jesus tells this story comes very close to being a caricature. It’s exaggerated, almost funny.

Women in the first century did not go out by themselves. In many places in the middle east today, that’s still the case. If they were unmarried, they went out only with the permission of their fathers. After they were married, their husbands had to be with them. And they had no rights. Their opinions carried no weight in court.

So, as a widow, the woman in the parable for today had nothing – no money, no power, no resources, no legal standing. She was so insignificant that she probably couldn’t have received justice, if she had found herself in front of a *good* judge.

But this judge? He's a caricature. Jesus says that he neither feared God, nor had respect for people. And the people listening must have smiled about that. Maybe they knew judges like this. He was a wretched excuse for a human being, the sort of judge who makes a mockery of the term "your honor."

So, tell me this, why would he have anything to do with this widow in the story, much less give her what she was asking for?

But wait. Did I say the widow had nothing? I was wrong. As it turns out, she had something. She had *one* thing. She had the ability, if you can call it that, to be a pest, to annoy, like a tiny insect that will not go away. And when you only have one weapon, you use it.

So, she annoyed this judge ... constantly. She shouted for justice in his courtroom. She knocked on the doors of his chambers. She left messages on his voice mail ... lots of them.

I don't know what the ancient equivalent of a restraining order might have been, but the judge probably thought about getting one of those. She did everything she could with the one thing she had.

And finally – you heard how the story ends – she wore this awful judge down. And so, the judge said to himself, **"You know, I don't care about justice. And I certainly don't care about this widow. I don't like people. I don't like God. But this woman is driving me crazy. I'm going to give her what she wants just to get rid of her, just to be free of her."**

Pray always. Do not lose heart. Persevere. Keep going. Put one foot in front of another. And eventually – at long last – you will get what you want.

I have a confession to make about this. I am a sucker for this sort of advice. I am easily seduced or taken in. I don't know what it is, but I was wired up to keep going, to keep trying, no matter what.

And unless I am wrong about most of you, I think you are probably the same way. You and I were raised by our parents or grandparents to be strivers, to work hard, to put off gratification as long as possible.

I remember my first job interview, and I remember being asked, **"Well, what hobbies do you have."** And I said, **"Hobbies! I've been going to school for as long as I can remember. I don't have any hobbies. Hobbies are for retired people."**

And sometimes, to be honest with you, I have my doubts about how healthy that is. But it's deep within my nature. And I suspect that it is deep within yours too. By nature we are people who do not give up.

As some of you know, I was a runner for more than 30 years. And running – maybe you knew this – requires no athletic ability whatsoever. If you can put one foot in front of the other, you can be a runner or maybe a walker.

So, as someone without much athletic ability, running was a sport that appealed to me. You don't have to be good at it; you just have to keep going.

When I trained for my first Chicago Marathon, I read some inspiring stories to keep me going through the long months of training, and one of the best stories I read was about the 3 D's of long-distance training.

Drive, determination, and discipline.

And I remember thinking, **“Well, I’ve got all of those, so maybe I can do this thing.”**

So, I’m out there, on the streets of Chicago, on a cold Sunday morning in October, and I’m at the 20 mile mark (more than 32 kilometers), but there are still 6.2 miles to go (10 kilometers). And I am hurting everywhere. I was chafing in places I didn’t know it was possible to chafe. Every cell in my body wanted to quit.

As it turns out, there is a physiological reason for why that happens, but sometimes the brain can overrule the body. And I remember thinking, **“I trained for the last six months to do this, and I am not going to walk the rest of the way. I’m going to finish this thing running.”**

And I did. It wasn’t pretty. People may have turned away when they saw me. Susan was waiting for me at the end to drive me home, while I stretched out moaning in agony in the back seat. But here’s my question. Was that a good idea? Is persistence always something to admire?

I think that the correct answer is actually no. Sometimes it’s better to give up. And it may surprise you to hear me say that.

But sometimes – for the sake of your health or your marriage or your work – it’s better to stop what you’re doing. Think of it this way. Not every cause is worth dying for. Not every injustice in life has to be addressed. Not every slight has to be avenged.

Sometimes it’s okay to let it go, to get on with your life, to live.

It was Jesus who said – earlier in this same gospel, as a matter of fact – **“if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.”** You don’t have to make every wrong right. You don’t have to fight every minute of your life for truth and justice. You don’t.

Do you know the old expression, **“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”** It was the British writer William Edward Hickson who first wrote that. Well, this week I found a small variation on that line: **“If at first you don’t succeed, re-define success.”**

I don’t know if I believe that, but I do believe that there are times when persistence is not an admirable quality.

So, okay, if it’s true that not every cause is worth dying for, then what is Jesus saying to us here in chapter 18? What does it mean to say, **“Pray always and do not lose heart.”**

Think about Jesus’ parable in this way: the disciples were having problems with prayer, with what it really meant to have a relationship with God. I don’t that I saw this before, but this is a theme that occurs over and over again in the gospel. Luke’s gospel is very concerned that we know what we’re doing when we pray.

“Lord,” the disciples say at one point, **“teach us to pray. Teach us to do what we see you doing, because we often feel as though we’re not doing it right.”**

So, here in chapter 18, Jesus is continuing to teach them about prayer, about how to have a relationship with God, how to be a person of faith – not just on Sunday, but the rest of the week.

We often think we're the first people ever to be discouraged. We assume we're the first to wonder if our prayers amount to anything, if they do any good, if God even hears them.

But, as it turns out, the disciples were asking all the same questions that we ask.

When we pray, we wonder if we're just talking to ourselves. We worry that, in the end, it doesn't add up to anything. And frankly, the temptation is just to lose heart. If it doesn't do any good, why keep at it?

Over the years, I have prayed lots of pastoral prayers during worship – I've lost count of the number. At IPC the elders pray, which I like very much, but for a long time, it was what I was expected to do, on behalf of my congregation.

And thinking back, I would for peace just about every week. It was a regular theme. I don't know, but maybe it was because there has been so much war during my adult life.

Whatever it was, on Sunday mornings, it seemed important to me to pray for peace, wherever this is conflict, wherever ancient hatreds are flaring up.

A few years ago, though, and this was a troubling moment for me spiritually, I remember thinking, **"Why am I doing this?"** I pray and pray and pray for peace, and nothing ever happens. War never seems to end. In fact, maybe I am being counterproductive. The more I pray for peace, the more war there seems to be.

Over the years, I also prayed that hungry people might be fed. And that the grieving might be comforted. And tell me, what do I have to show for it? War is still with us. And so is hunger. And I meet more grieving people every day.

I get discouraged. And frankly, there are days when I feel like quitting.

And then I read these verses, like ones I read for you: Pray always. Do not lose heart. And then I think, **"Maybe my prayer life needs a little of the same drive, determination, and discipline that I manage to find for other things in my life. Maybe I need to find little of that persistence that I demonstrated for school and career and family. Maybe prayer is supposed to be hard."**

Training for a marathon takes six months or so, but that's nothing compared to a lifetime. Maybe I am just getting warmed up. Maybe my best, most effective years of prayer are still ahead of me.

I read a wonderful story last week about Mother Teresa, who was recently made a saint by the Catholic church. Mother Teresa went to see a wealthy American trial lawyer one day to ask for money to start an AIDS hospice.

Before she arrived, according to the story, the lawyer said to his partner, **"You know, AIDS is not my favorite cause. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do."**

So, the two lawyers agreed that they would be polite, and they would hear her out, and then they would say no.

So, Mother Teresa arrived, and as you know she was no bigger than a sparrow, and she sat on the other side of the lawyer's enormous mahogany desk. And she made her appeal for the hospice, and when she was finished the lawyer said, **"We're deeply touched by your appeal, and it's a great honor to meet you, but the answer is no."**

And Mother Teresa, as if anticipating that response, said, **"Let us pray."** The lawyers looked at each other, because this was not what they were expecting, but both of them bowed their heads.

After the prayer, Mother Teresa proceeded to make the same pitch, using exactly same words she had the first time, clearly having memorized the script.

And when she was finished, the lawyer once again referred to *his* script and said, **"We're deeply touched by your appeal, and it's a great honor to meet you, but the answer is no."**

So, Mother Teresa again said, **"Let us pray,"** and she bowed her head for the second time.

At this point the lawyer, as you might expect, was exasperated, and he said, **"How much do you need?"**

Do you know something? I think that's a little closer to what Jesus has in mind for us – in other words, that we bang our fists on the doors of heaven with our prayers, that we hang on and not let go, until we leave with what we came for.

We may be tiny and insignificant in the world-wide scheme of things. We may not count for much in the eyes of other people. We may appear to have nothing at all. But all of us have at least *one* thing.

The story says, if a poor widow with no standing can finally wrangle justice out of a judge who hasn't a shred of decency, how much more will you – God's own child, someone God formed in the womb, someone God has loved from the beginning – how much more will you find a God who will hear you and answer your prayer.

Pray always. And do not lose heart.