

2022-10-30 Worship Service

Good morning! Welcome! Whether you're here in-person or on zoom, we're glad you're here! This morning we'll look at another parable that Jesus told and try to understand its message in its own time and what it might mean for us, today.

As we turn to the Opportunities for Celebration and Service, you'll note in your bulletin, the first announcement is from John Fast, the congregational chair, reporting on the results of the pastoral vote last week. Since Caleb is away this morning we decided to record our responses together...

What are other things you have to share this morning?

- Flowers this morning are a gift from the Voth family, shared from Marvin's service.
- Tonight is the Peace Committee's presentation by Dwight Krehbiel and his student about climate change and earth care. Begins at 7:00 in the Fellowship Hall.
- The GMA Community Thanksgiving Dinner is two weeks from today! Please sign up for the various food items and tasks that need to be done. Also – the message from James at the grocery store is, please call him or go in and talk to him directly about ordering turkey or ham. Just place the order so he gets an idea of how many he'll need – he'll figure out the bill for you, but now the most important thing is to get that meat ordered.

Please join in the Call to Worship as it's printed in your bulletin:

Morning Prayer – Pastor Lois Harder

We thank you, God, for the beauty of this day and of this place. We thank you for our forebears and for others who lived on this land before them. We pray for an attitude of humility, gratefulness and respect for those who came before us.

Gracious God, we thank you for our elders, for those who are here, worshiping with us this morning and for those who live at Bethesda or Schowalter or Kidron-Bethel or other places where they receive care. Thank you for all that we have learned - and continue to learn from them, for the love and care we've received from them and for the grief we feel when they can no longer be here to worship with us and when they pass from this world to join you in eternity. We pray especially for the family of Marvin Voth as we laid his body to rest and celebrated his life together here yesterday. We pray others who are grieving the loss of loved ones. Be near to them; bring your comfort and healing. Bring joy alongside the sadness of the grief.

O God, along with our elders, we're grateful for the young people among us. Be with those who are students. Be with those who are working. Lead them and walk beside them as they make decisions, try new things and formulate their lives' directions and paths. May they know your love and our love as they grow and live each day.

God, you are the great healer and we ask for your healing touch for bodies, minds and spirits that are ailing. Be with Norman Schroeder as he has rehab and therapy now as part of the healing for his broken leg. Be with Leona and the rest of the family as they visit him and encourage him in this difficult time. Be with others whose needs you know and who we remember in prayer now in these moments of quiet...

Gracious God, you hear the cries of your people all over the world as they struggle with poverty, oppression, conflict and injustice. Even as we pray for your care and keeping of all your

children, we ask that we might be moved to walk in your ways, to shine your light, to show your love and to be your hands and feet in this world. We pray in the name of Jesus who showed us how. Amen. Let's worship God now by giving our financial offering

Sermon – Prayer, Persistence and Faith

Like the other parables of Jesus, this one is packed, powerful and provocative. Luke tells us that the reason for Jesus telling this story is to show his disciples that they should pray **always – consistently**, without giving up. This parable is an exhortation, an invitation for those who are enduring wrongs being done to them, to KEEP praying, under any and all circumstances, trusting that God *will* bring vindication and justice. Jesus knew that if his disciples followed his examples, they would undoubtedly meet with resistance and wrongful accusations. As they challenged the systemic injustices of their day, as Jesus did, they would have to depend on prayer. They would need to immerse themselves in understanding God's call to bring shalom – peace and well-being for all – in order to be empowered to carry out God's mission that Jesus was teaching them about. No one can be about God's business without plugging into The Source directly, constant and consistent prayer. The widow in this story is a model for this kind of prayer. The implication is that she could not have been so persistent without utilizing the power of prayer.

Widows in Jesus' time were the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. This is why we read throughout the Bible that God's people are commanded to care for the widows and the orphans, the resident aliens and the strangers. These were the people who had no resources, no voice and who were inevitably mistreated and neglected by the systems of the status quo.

Now the job of judges in ancient Israel was to hear grievances that the people had against one another, to listen carefully and impartially, and to advocate for those who had no one else to advocate for them. There were no juries – only judges. The judges were expected to revere God and care about people. They were supposed to defend those at the margins. At our Wednesday evening Bible study one person astutely asked, "Why was this guy a judge anyway!? He was terrible!" It's accurate! In reading further about first century Palestine and the way the system was set up, I learned some things. I learned that common Jewish law recommended a tribunal of at least 3 judges – up to 7 – for a town or village that had at least 120 men. But the reality was that it was often difficult to find that many men who were sufficiently educated in the Torah. Gift discernment and filling needed positions was a challenge even way back in the first century! So, what sometimes happened was that just one person was deemed better than nobody to be a judge. But people, being people, were not always completely sincere in their desire or willingness to carry out the law as it was intended. The judges, of course, had a lot of power, so people sometimes bought or cajoled their way into those positions. And since that's the way they got into those positions, they were more easily bought or bribed for their decisions in order to stay in those powerful positions. It seems that human nature has not changed much in the last 2,000 years.

This widow was desperate. And she had nothing to lose by continuing to pester this judge and plead her case. She was asking that he give her what she was rightfully due. We don't know exactly what her situation was, but we do know that women in ancient times were considered property themselves and very rarely would women have been granted property. For this reason there were specific Levitical laws about how widows were to be cared for. But since

this judge, by his own admission, didn't care about God, let alone the Levitical laws nor did he care about people, he had very little motivation or incentive to grant this woman justice. Middle Eastern culture is strongly shame-based. But this guy seems to have no shame! So, although this woman made frequent, public cries for justice which should have made the judge feel ashamed, he put her off, ignored her and was not attentive to her need.

And yet – he was her only hope. She was alone. She had no one to stand up with her or for her. And so, she was also shameless in her persistence, returning to the judge over and over again, loudly, asking for protection, asking for her rights to be acknowledged and given, asking for justice. She was not asking for punishment or retribution against those who were taking advantage of her – only for her own protection – what she should have been granted simply in view of her circumstances.

This woman was bold! It must have taken incredible courage to keep coming back to this man over and over again knowing that she would likely be ignored and sent away – or worse. And yet, she knew that she was in the right, and so she kept on. The judge was finally worn down by her persistence, realizing that she would not stop and that he was in the position, finally, of possibly losing face and status because of the public ruckus this woman was constantly making – and because of the fact that she was on much higher moral ground than he.

Then in those last three verses, Luke returns to offer interpretation of the parable pointing out the deep contrast between the unjust judge and God. If even this unjust judge will finally concede and give the widow justice how much more fully and quickly will God come to the aid of those who cry out? And then, the tag line that was so common among the early writers, the reference to Jesus' return – which they all thought was imminent... "When the Son of Man comes, will he find this kind of persistent faith on the earth?"

So – what are we to make of this confounding and kind of strange story? If you've never experienced a situation that required constant and consistent prayer, pleading for justice to be done – justice that amounted to a life or death situation, you may have to try to put yourself in someone else's shoes to really grasp the significance of this parable. Maybe you can try to imagine what that would be like.

For those Sunday school classes who are using the "Salt and Light" curriculum, this parable was used in last week's lesson. The writers of that curriculum used the struggle of Black people in this country as an example of modern day disciples using the power of prayer and perseverance to bring about systemic change. One of the writers, John Powell, is Black and he told this story as a kind of contemporary parallel to this parable in Luke:

"Black folks needed to 'know their place' in the segregated South. They were careful not to offend white folks. All Black folks had a role in keeping everyone safe. Faith and prayer were keys for protection and deliverance. Worship had an extended time of supplication, asking God's protection as we lived with the uncertainty. Gray-haired grandmas were the 'prayer warriors.' They believed that if one earnestly prayed, God would bring justice. One day Josie's son was arrested for hitting and spitting on a white man. People were worried about his safety. Grandma Susie said, "I'll just leave it in the hands of the Lord." Later, Grandma Susie encountered the sheriff shopping at the community store. Susie looked at him and said, "Mr. Charlie, I nursed you. You and Ray fished together. You know that boy didn't do what they said.

God don't like ugly." Passing the sheriff as she left the store, she said (again), "God don't like ugly." She prayed as she walked. Josie visited Susie afterward. With joyful tears she said, "Thank the Lord! My son's home." When Susie asked why he was released, Josie said, "Don't know. Mr. Charlie just looked at him and said, 'God don't like ugly. Git home, boy!'"

This story made me think of how those who struggled during the civil rights movement were well-trained, disciplined. They practiced and prayed and were persistent in their cries for justice. It reminded me of the five points that Martin Luther King, Jr. used to teach about nonviolent resistance. As I read them again, it occurred to me that these five points illustrate the kind of prayerful perseverance that Jesus was talking about in the parable. Some of you may remember these from 50+ years ago, but it might be helpful to have a reminder. Briefly, they are as follows:

1. Nonviolence is not a method for cowards; it *does* resist. The nonviolent resister is just as strongly opposed to the evil against which he protests as is the person who uses violence... This method is passive physically but strongly active spiritually; it is nonaggressive physically but dynamically aggressive spiritually.
2. A second point is that nonviolent resistance does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. Often noncooperation or boycotts are used, but those tools are not ends themselves; they are merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.
3. A third characteristic of nonviolence is that the attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who are caught in those forces. It is evil we are seeking to defeat, not the persons victimized by evil... The tension is at bottom between justice and injustice.
4. A fourth point is that nonviolent resistance avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love.
5. Finally, the method of nonviolence is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. It is this deep faith in the future that causes the nonviolent resister to accept suffering without retaliation. He knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship. This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith. There is something at the very center of our faith which reminds us that Good Friday may reign for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the Easter drums.

The widows, the orphans, the resident aliens and the strangers among us – those who are on the margins, those who struggle to be heard, those who are crying out for justice; this is the perspective of the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge. It might be a hard story for us, partly because many of us don't have that kind of direct perspective in our life experiences.

But by God's grace, I trust we can have minds and hearts that are open to the difficulties and struggles of others. I hope we can listen carefully and hear their truth. I

believe we can reflect God's goodness and compassion as we order the priorities of our lives. And I believe we can keep learning how to collaborate with God and with one another to bring the kingdom of heaven ever closer to earth.

I invite the choir to come up now and sing. Hymn number 712 is in the section of the hymnal called "Praying for World". I think the text of this song beautifully expresses our call as God's people to try to bring beauty to the brokenness of the world through prayer and action.