

Genesis 32:22-31  
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5  
Luke 18:1-8**Luke 18:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Jesus told this memorable story about the importance of prayer. The first verse of our Gospel lesson this morning reads, “Then Jesus told them about their *need to pray always* and not to lose heart.” That is a laudable and appropriate thing for Jesus to say – and it is an appropriate thing for us to listen to. Teaching disciples to pray is the sort of thing we expect of Jesus and it is the sort of subject matter we expect in our sermons.

But then Jesus tells *this* story – which seems neither appropriate nor laudable. Instead of a nice Bible story with maybe a verse we could put in a greeting card – Jesus presents us with an unethical judge and a woman who has been called, kindly, “the persistent widow”. (I have also heard her called the holy nag.) The widow keeps coming to the judge. The judge is too **immoral** to do the right thing. She is too much of a **nuisance** to leave him alone about it. Which one of these characters are we supposed to learn from?

Don’t let it trouble you too much that Jesus compares God to this unrighteous judge who doesn’t care one way or the other about justice. Jesus said something similar in Luke Eleven when he pointed out that even a bad parent wouldn’t give a hungry child a scorpion to eat when the child asked for an egg – and if a bad parent knows how to treat a child, surely we can expect proper treatment from God. In the same way, in this passage Jesus is saying, “If a judge who

doesn't care about justice can be convinced to do the right thing, surely we can expect at least that much from God."

But Jesus wants us to learn our behavior from the widow. We are to learn from the woman who needs something and knows where to go to ask for it. She asks and she continues to ask.

Her **faith** does not fail because she doesn't get what she needs the first time. Her **pride** does not tell her that she should quit asking if she doesn't get what she needs.

The woman takes **responsibility** for changing her life. Jesus tells us to learn from this woman. Learn something about prayer and faith. Learn to avoid the limitations of pride. Learn to take responsibility for changing our lives.

The judge in this story is the one with power. He can make changes; the widow can't. That may sound familiar. It may even sound comforting. We see a lot of things that need changing. World-wide climate change to a teenager with a math problem and everything in between, and in everything from cosmic disasters to the elusive value of  $x$ , the claim that the answers are beyond us can be a safe place to hide. It can be comforting to say, "Someone else has the power. Someone else knows the answers. I'm just a poor widow in an unjust world."

We happen to be citizens of a society in which we do participate in the means of justice. I and many of my fellow citizens take great pride in the genius of our system of government and then ignore the implications of living in it. We are not always comfortable with the fact that we have some responsibilities for the world we live in.

Our society is the source a good deal of cynicism. It is a participatory democracy but it seems like people are more likely to participate if their participation is profitable and it benefits them. And people seem to be all too ready to disassociate themselves from society when it is headed in the wrong direction.

When people realize they live in a troubled world, that's a good time to be selling those bumper stickers that begin with the words: "Don't blame me..." Jesus told a story about the "need to pray always and not to lose heart". He did not give us a story about a widow who displayed a bumper sticker reading, "Don't blame me, the judge is a crook". He told a story about a woman who wanted the world to come into line with what she knew was right. She was persistent about it.

We need to pray always and not lose heart.

Opinion polls tell us that many people are dissatisfied with many things about the world we live in and the way people treat each other. I count myself in that number. But the world will not be a better place if we have more peevish people, it will be a better place if we have more faithful people. People who are persistent in bringing about a world that values social justice, education, our environment, civil conversation, and the ability to listen.

You can be one of those people. No matter how powerless you claim to be or how stubborn the judge is, you can be a person of faith.

In the past couple of weeks the cognoscenti of Stockholm have awarded the annual Nobel Prizes in the usual categories: economics, peace, medicine, science and that sort of thing. Those folks do amazing things. I can't imagine that they have achieved such major accomplishments without tremendous persistence. I will admit that I've never met a Nobel Laureate; I have met faithful people, though. In the last couple of weeks I have listened to a man who wanted to keep a memory alive of a person back in the 1930s who used the legal system to fight the Ku Klux Klan, so he devoted some years and energy to writing a book so that we would have a memory of justice. I heard from a man who spends a good deal of time with disabled students. There was a mother who was trying to find the best way to show love and support for her child who was having trouble. A young man – he couldn't have been twenty – rang my doorbell and talked to me about how he thought funding should be handled so more

students could attend a local community college. Last week, a friend saw an elderly neighbor of hers fall down in the yard and injure herself and she rushed out and helped the neighbor and got her medical attention. There was a fellow who told me about the constant demands of running a dog rescue center. There were lots of people at the workday yesterday, here at church. Lots of people are teaching Sunday School, and they are teaching it in a new building that got built because of the dedication of a lot of people who planned it and the dedication of a lot of people who are in the process of paying for it. None of those people are likely to receive world-wide recognition. They are, however, people of faith.

One thing they all have in common is they see something they feel needs to be done and they refuse to leave it undone. They will not designate their lives as somebody else's problem.

They will not let other people determine their values.

That's what Jesus' story comes down to. The widow was not powerful; in that society she probably had no social standing and no money. The judge had a prestigious position in society, but the widow would live by her own values.

We don't have to listen very carefully to hear the voices of surrender to prestigious positions in society. They say things like: "I can't be the only one who is paying for that and nobody else is doing their share." or "Our family can't even schedule our own time with school and activities intruding." or "If I try to have an honest conversation about how I feel about it, I will just be giving ammunition that can be used against me." or "I already know enough about what I believe; I've believed it forever and I can't start questioning it now." or "When everybody else's family has one, we can't be the only one who doesn't."

The judge is powerful. If the widow is practical she will give up. But this is not called "The Parable of the *Practical* Widow". It is called "The Parable of the *Persistent* Widow".

Jesus tells this story "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart". And he finishes the story with a question. It almost seems out of place. "When the Son of Man comes,

will he find faith on earth?” It almost sounds like Jesus changed the subject from “praying a lot” to “the end of time”. And he was wondering if he would come to earth at the end of it all and look around and decide that he had to go back to heaven by himself because he might not be able to find anyone in this thoroughly unsatisfactory world who had accomplished enough to make them worth taking back to heaven with him.

Jesus did not change the subject at the last minute. Jesus calls for “faith on earth”, not so he can populate heaven, but because he needs his will to be done on this earth that God has created. He needs his will done among the people he loves. He need his will done according to the values and the purpose and the love that he proclaims.

Jesus calls for faith on earth and faith is measured in persistence – not necessarily in accomplishment. Jesus continues to call us to be people of peace, and he is unlikely to be impressed by an argument that the voices of war are too strong and our enemies are too dangerous. Jesus continues to call us to value people we don’t know as much as we value ourselves. He wants the people he loves to be wise and deep and thoughtful. He wants the Sermon on the Mount to be more influential in our lives than television commercials and gossip radio.

That’s not easy. It requires persistence. Jesus tells us to be like the widow, the one who doesn’t have much influence or authority. She does has persistence. She will continue to have faith.

Jesus asks that final question in this morning’s Gospel lesson: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”. He is not asking about how many good things will have been accomplished. He is asking about what people are doing to try to accomplish them.

That is the measure of faith – to love God even when his ways seem powerless in the face of the unfair judge and all he represents. It is a life worth living. And it fills God’s world with a joy that welcomes the Son of Man anytime he chooses to come.