

Sermon on Luke 18:1-8
22nd Sunday after Pentecost, October 16, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. You and I have just heard a parable read that is deeply troubling – while at the same time, comforting. How is this possible? Jesus told his disciples this parable which he said was “*about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*” So at one level, this parable is about prayer, and being hopeful, because God is listening and will answer.

But then we know that oftentimes we pray, and it seems that our prayers aren’t answered. We pray for health, and our sickness remains. We pray for life, and know that death always comes in the end. We pray for work, for success, for our children, for a spouse or partner – and often are disappointed. But still Jesus encourages us to pray, and the saints of the Church – apostles, saints of the past, and the faithful living today, show us the example of their faith in prayer and trust in God. It is always better to hope than to live in despair. Point well taken.

But just as soon as Jesus makes this point, the parable takes a turn in a whole new direction! It gives us a living example of what we are up against in this world, in this parable of the *Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow*. It’s like Jesus saying, “being persistent in prayer is like a widow coming up before an unfair judge in housing court”. Jesus describes the judge – the person in power - as someone who “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” We’ve all come up against people like that, like a boss full of themselves and their power, who walks over everybody and gets their joy from putting other people down. Then there is the other character in the story: a widow, who by definition would be among the most vulnerable in all society, without a husband to “represent” or “protect” her – and to help ensure that she would get justice in her case.

It’s impossible to read this parable without thinking about what has been happening in our national election, and on the news lately. When women stand up to sexism and disrespect from men who are in a position of power over them, or just against the whole system - a male culture of sexism and power over women. This just doesn’t happen in politics, in show business, or in business. This happens all the time in people’s homes, and it even happens in the Church, in every congregation! We can’t deny it anymore – just because we have female bishops and a woman running for president! So there is a level, I think, that women hear this parable that I, as a male, can never understand. We all know that there are people who don’t have any fear of God in this world, and don’t treat other people with respect. We men are also becoming more and more aware of how common it

is for women to be treated disrespectfully and discounted, by justice and economic systems that devalue women. We just weren't as aware of them because we didn't experience such treatment ourselves, and it takes brave, persistent women to tell their stories and make us all aware. Because they will be questioned, ridiculed, even threatened if they dare to come forward. We hope justice will come, and more quickly. Even Martin Luther has a word for us in the *Small Catechism*, written in 1529, in his explanation to the Sixth Commandment "You Shall Not Commit Adultery", when he said: "*We are to fear and love God, so that in matters of sex we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.*" In today's contentious times, justice comes when we speak with honor and respect to and with all women and men, children, male, female and all genders, - for all human beings are sacred creations of God!

But back to the parable. The widow, it seems, has been before this judge before. We are not told what the case is about – maybe it's about some property she owned that was in dispute, or maybe she was being mistreated or cheated by somebody in business – we don't know, but it doesn't really matter. Because she is determined to be heard, so she keeps coming before this judge to make her case. He is tired of hearing about it, and sick of hearing her voice. Finally, after the umpteenth time hearing her case, he says to her: "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." Literally, he said she was giving him a "black eye" – not literally, but the fact that she kept coming to him for justice was publicly embarrassing him, and wreaking havoc with his reputation. So he settled (without admitting guilt), to cut his losses.

Does this sound like an advertisement to "pray always and do not lose heart?" Hardly! But here's the point: even when the result you want looks impossible, keep praying! Like that widow did with that judge. Now this is not to compare God to the unjust judge – but sometimes don't we complain that "God is just not fair!?" We seldom dare say it out loud – it's not polite to complain about God in church (though we can all say what we want about the Church)! It's really describing what persistence in prayer can mean in the extreme, with Jesus' illustration from this surprising parable, comparing prayer with going to court before a judge who doesn't care to listen!

Maybe it means we can pester God to act – just like Abraham did in the story where he "talked God down" to not destroying the city of Sodom if he could find 100 righteous persons there, then down to 50, then 40, then 30, then 20, then down to 10. I guess Abraham didn't have the guts to try to talk God down to zero – maybe God was just waiting for Abraham to dare ask that, and would have agreed to that also! (I'm only speculating, but it seems consistent to the view of God as a forgiving parent and not a vengeful judge!)

Does anyone complain to God in the Bible and live? Oh, yes, the Bible is full of stories like that! Moses complained to God often about leading him out into the desert, and those “stiff-necked people” he had to lead, who kept complaining to him how good it was back in Egypt. When were they ever going to get to that Promised Land? Forty years it took. That was persistence! The prophets also complained mightily to God about the impossible task they were given, to preach repentance to people who kept falling away from God. So many of the Psalms were laments, written as complaints to God about the trouble other people caused them, and God not listening – all written for the peoples’ worship service. So Psalms are a treasure for us today, to give us words of complaint, sorrow and loss directly to God, but leading us to remember the God in whom we trust and speak our praise. So this parable Jesus told, about a persistent widow who brought her complaints to this judge, is right in character with the lament psalms and other prayers of the people which honestly and painfully name our trouble, and challenge our faith. When we don’t feel we have been heard, we have to keep praying!

It is a painful truth that human beings can wait a long time for justice to be done – it can take generations! Many still wait! We think today of Native Americans, who have lost their lands to broken treaties since 1492, who still wait for them to be honored, and to find justice that will allow them to live in abundance instead of poverty in this land. We think of African American peoples who first came unwillingly in chains, after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 ended slavery, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and wonder how long we have to wait for true freedom and equity to be experienced by all people in this nation. We think of the many thousands who sit in jails and prison cells, both undocumented immigrants detained before deportation, and those imprisoned unjustly or for minor, non-violent offences. We think of all those who can’t get justice in housing court, or family court, who just sit and wait for years before their cases are heard, or can’t afford their day in court. For too many, persistence is a luxury they can never hope to afford.

In the midst of such despair over the long wait for justice, Jesus teaches us the lesson we can learn from the widow’s persistence – when even a disrespectful, callous judge granted her justice. Jesus said, *“Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

Okay, this is good news, as well as a challenge. God is so much more compassionate and forgiving than any earthly judge, that in comparison we can indeed be hopeful, and bring our joys, our sorrows, and our complaints to God – and we will be heard. I don’t know if I can be as hopeful as Jesus was he asks: “will God delay?” “He will quickly grant justice!” I don’t know if I am that

patient – are you? But then, Bishop Anne Svenningsen said in a sermon last week that another translation of the Greek word for “quickly” is “*suddenly*”! That “suddenly” God will grant justice, in ways that often come to us as a surprise. Yes, that works! I can go with this! God hears our prayers, and will also bring justice which comes to us suddenly, unexpectedly, often as a total surprise! Like when families are reconciled, when warring nations come together in peace. Like when the Berlin Wall came down after 50 long years; like when apartheid ended in South Africa – it seemed like a sudden surprise! Even when Lutherans and Roman Catholics come together in 2016 after 500 years of division, to celebrate in worship together on Reformation Day, October 31, as they will with Pope Francis in a Lutheran cathedral in Lund, Sweden this month! Now *that’s* a surprise: this reconciliation between churches that have been killing each other for centuries. Though it didn’t come quickly- it seems all of a sudden, we’re here!

So with prayer, and with persistence, justice will come. We are people of faith, who believe in the God of justice and compassion. The prophet Amos said, “*Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream!*” (Amos 5:24) Justice will come, just as surely as the day follows the night, and night follows the day. Jesus has promised that he is coming again, to bring justice and peace to all the earth – we just don’t know the day or the hour! So we wait, we work, we pray, we hope. Then the real challenge is this: “*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” Our witness of faith must be: “yes!” Amen.