

Sermon on Luke 18:1-8
19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 20, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The gospel story today is seldom popular with preachers, because it doesn't seem to be a word of "good news" which we are called to preach. It seems to illustrate the familiar saying, which is NOT in the Bible, that *the squeaky wheel gets the grease*. I think you know what I mean.

For we all have experience with stories about a distracted parent and a persistent child demanding attention, who won't stop crying to be held or for that toy on the store shelf. Maybe the parent is you, sometimes (I know I have been that person). When you finally stop what you are doing to play or read with your child, not because you want to be a "perfect parent", but because you can't stand the crying. (We've all been there, haven't we?!) I confess. My bad!

Sometimes we see the child in the classroom who keeps disrupting class, or always demands the teacher's attention, and we see it as misbehavior and irritating. We wonder what is "wrong" with that child? Especially if they hit another child, or throw chairs, so that they are sent to the "behavior specialist". We don't know what is going on at home, or their treatment by parents, relatives, or other children which might make them act out in this way. Is the cry for attention a call for justice, to address abuse outside of school? Sometimes the only way for a school or institution to take notice is by responding to a child's persistent cries.

In the gospel, Jesus tells a parable that is hard to understand – again, where's the gospel in it? A judge who is notorious for being uninterested in justice (and knows it!), is faced in court once again by a widow seeking justice, who won't take "no" for an answer! He keeps denying her case, and she keeps coming back. The woman is a widow – someone known to be vulnerable in a society that requires that a woman have a male relative – a father, husband or a son – to provide for her welfare. In the Bible, God demands that the people care for widows and orphans! But the judge seems deaf to her pleas for justice. However, in the parable, the judge gets so tired of listening to this widow, that he finally grants her justice – so that she would not literally "give him a black eye"! Is this "good news?" Hardly. But realistically, maybe it is! In a hard, unjust world, sometimes it is just plain old perseverance and luck, wearing out your adversaries, that brings a just result. For the marginalized in society, organized campaigns of protest for human rights can take years, even a lifetime, before just action results, if ever.

But in this world's reality of presidents betraying allies, and dictators refusing to care for their nation's suffering populations, justice systems with corrupt, violent police, and unrighteous judges like the one in this parable, it is easy to become discouraged and give up. But Jesus declares hope: *“Listen to what the unjust judge says. That because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming. 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?”*

If you are looking for some good news today, in a depressing week of bad news around the world, with plenty of corruption to go around, perhaps this is it! Compare the unrighteous judges (like this one) to God, who is perfect in justice and mercy (who in fact “defines” the term justice!); If EVEN THIS corrupt, unrighteous judge can get justice right once, even for the wrong reasons, for his own sanity and peace of mind instead of the merits of the case, HOW MUCH MORE will you and I receive justice from God? The comparison is the point!

Because one of the problems we have as human beings is that too often we project the human failings of the Church or believers onto God. We see an unrighteous Pope, or Bishop, pastor or priest and project that lack of unrighteousness on God, whom the Church is supposed to represent. This is often the Church's fault, because we call ourselves “The body of Christ”, and say we represent Jesus Christ in the world, God's Work, Our Hands! We probably had it coming! When we do right, we probably want people to see the Church as God's representatives! But when we fall short of our calling, when we do wrong, when the Church fails to protect vulnerable people (like children) from unrighteous pastors, priests, or youth leaders, we protest that we are not “God”! Still, the inconvenient truth is that unrighteous people of faith reflect badly on the Christian message and the Church, unrighteous pastors reflect badly on God, for whom they speak (in many people's eyes). The damage has been done. So repentance is in order, we must amend our ways, and take notice of all the abused women and children, widows and orphans whom we too often do not see. We might like to believe that we always are on the look-out for justice, but the truth is that most often we notice only when women like the woman in Jesus' parable speak up, often in annoying times and places, obnoxious to us and our sense of order.

So in these days when the Church is changing, mostly by necessity rather than choice, those of you who are impatient with the Church or want its leaders to see you, I hope Jesus' parable encourages you! The unrighteous judge does not represent God in the parable, and the Church is not God, nor are its leaders or clergy! Thank God for that! God is infinitely more wise, patient, compassionate and merciful than any sinful human being! God has mercy and compassion, and

God sees you! God sees injustice and suffering long before we do, and finds human voices to call attention to it, often in strong women like the parable's widow! So have hope, be persistent, keep on praying to God, and bugging the Church! Hang in there! God hears your voice, if nobody else does!

The apostle Paul in our second lesson wrote these encouraging words to Timothy in a letter: *“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed...in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead...I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”*

This sounds like a letter to us in the Church today! Persistence and faith, hope and love, are just what we need in these days. Perhaps this is our calling as people of faith today, when we see injustice and others suffering unjustly while people in power seem indifferent because they profit from the suffering of others, God gives us voices to speak up and draw attention to it. When children end up separated from their migrant parents seeking asylum and held in detention unjustly, when undocumented immigrant families are threatened with arrest or deportation and thus are afraid to seek protection from the courts or police, when women, children and men suffer from violence or abuse at home and are not protected due to antiquated laws and cultural stigmas, when persons of color are too often treated unjustly in the courts or prison system, when farm families lose their markets and face bankruptcy because of tariff wars while corporate farms are subsidized, when elected leaders get rich and the poor cannot make ends meet, God has something to say about this in the Law and the Prophets. We have been given the Word of God which tells us that God has compassion for suffering people, God sides with the poor, with orphans and widows, and God judges corruption, injustice and unethical conduct by leaders who are charged with the care of the people. The Word of God is a great gift, because the truth gives us power to speak, and the gift of faith gives us hope in troubled times. We have been called to tell the world about this Word that most have forgotten or never heard, when some in power would rather have us remain silent. Speaking the truth to power is seldom popular, and some will confuse God's prophetic word with “being political” in church. Some will leave the Church because they are not ready to hear this Word. But we have heard the truth, and the truth will set you free! We can no longer be silent, like the widow in the gospel who wouldn't shut up until the unrighteous judge gave her justice.

So, in a world filled with injustice, be persistent in prayer, and in seeking justice not only for yourself, but also for your neighbor. Jesus himself said “*Pray always, and do not lose heart!*” Keep the faith! Be faithful. You just might get lucky! In an unjust system, you still might get justice! And there are still plenty of judges and elected leaders who seek justice and follow the Law, who will set aside fear and do the right thing. Or God himself might answer your prayer. So stay hopeful. Don’t give up. Trust in God. Remember who watches over you faithfully, as the psalmist says, “who does not slumber nor sleep!” Remember that *the Lord watches over you; the Lord is your shade at your right hand; so that the sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night. The Lord will preserve you from all evil and will keep your life. The Lord will watch over your going out and your coming in, whatever comes, from this time forth forevermore.*