

Sermon for Proper 24C

Luke 18:1-8

'Don't lose heart'

Do you ever lose heart in your life of faith?

Do you ever grow weary in the practice of prayer?

What sorts of things cause this to happen for you?

Perhaps when prayers go *seemingly* unanswered...

Perhaps when God seems far away or indifferent...

Perhaps in your day to day life when you feel isolated as a Christian and that no one else around you bothers with God...

Perhaps when you feel the weight of sin and shame and so feel unworthy to pray...

Perhaps when life simply wears you down...

All these and more can tempt us to 'lose heart', to give up on the faith, to grow weary in prayer. And if this is you, when this is you, here's a word of encouragement from your Lord not to lose heart, but to keep the faith, to keep praying.

Notice that Jesus assumes we will sometimes feel like this. The temptation to lose heart isn't a sign we're not a real Christian or anything like that. It's almost the opposite. Jesus assumes this will be the experience of his disciples. That's why he wants to speak into this experience, to encourage and help you.

His parable does this in two very simple ways: by reminding us who God is, and who we are. So, let's take a closer look at it.

THE PARABLE – JUDGE AND WIDOW

'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people'
v 2.

So in short, this guy is a real piece of work. He's in a position of significant responsibility where he is supposed to arbitrate justice on God's behalf, and for the sake of God's people...

But he doesn't care about God, to whom he is accountable, or about people, who he is there to help. He's interested only in number one. Pure self-interest. So there's the judge.

'In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent"'. v 3

So on the one hand you have the judge in his position of responsibility, power and influence, on the other hand you have the widow, a picture of the little person in the community, the vulnerable one, the one who is basically in a position of *helplessness*. She has no money and resources to use, she's on her own, she has no one to advocate for her, she has no great status in society or relationship with the judge. She's in a

desperate and somewhat hopeless situation. Even in our modern times we may be able to resonate with the situation.

It's often still the case that the vulnerable, those without the necessary resources, have more trouble getting justice. And yet even in this seemingly hopeless situation, eventually the unjust judge does give her justice. Why? Well the judge says, *'because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, So that she may not wear me out by continually coming'*.

The one resource she does have is persistence. Annoying persistence. And the judge is so sick of this he is ready to do anything just to get it off his radar. And it has the ring of truth doesn't it? *'The squeaky wheel gets the grease'*, we say. You parents know you sometimes give your kids things you shouldn't because you just want them to leave you alone for a few moment's peace! This is the way it is, isn't it?

This is the parable, fairly straight forward really. But what does it mean? What does it teach us? How does it encourage us to keep praying when we lose heart?

We need to be careful here not to jump to our conclusions from this parable, but rather listen very carefully to how Jesus applies it, because he is most emphatically not saying that God is like this judge, and if you just pester him enough you'll get what you want. That is not what Jesus is saying here.

Indeed he wants to encourage us to keep praying always, but the big point is to use this judge and widow as a contrast to us, to remind us that actually God is nothing like this judge, and our relationship to him is far more than this judge to the widow.

THE APPLICATION – WHO GOD IS, WHO WE ARE

So the parable goes on in verse 6,

'And the Lord said, "listen to what the unjust judge says"' ... (v 6)

In other words, did you hear what this unjust judge said in the parable?

He said that even though he is so crooked and uncaring, he's going to hear this widow's request and give her justice. And so here's the punchline, *'Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them'*.

So the point isn't that God is like this grumpy unjust judge and we need to wear him down so he'll give us what we want.

The point is that if even this unjust judge, who is completely selfish, who cares nothing for the widow, who has no particular relationship to the widow, if even he will give her justice... then HOW MUCH MORE, how much more, will your perfectly just and righteous, all loving and compassionate God, who does care for the people he has chosen as his very own, how much more will your God hear your prayers, and bring justice to you? That's the big point of the parable, to remind you of who God is.

It's very much a parallel from a few chapters earlier in Luke's Gospel when Jesus said: *'If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children,*

How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him'. So that's who God is.

But remember I said the parable also reminds us who we are in relation to God. Who are you? Well you're not just another case on the to-do list, you are not an insignificant number to him.

The text speaks of his chosen ones, his elect. In other words, unlike the widow, you do have a special status with God, you do have a particular relationship to him, he has chosen you to be his own, He has chosen you from before the foundation of the world to be holy and righteous in his sight. Your God is not unjust, he is not indifferent, he is not hard to access,

God has chosen you, he loves you, he cares for you, he is with you and ready to hear you, he wants good for you. And through this Word your Lord wants to remind you of this, and the Holy Spirit wants to drive that truth deeper into your heart and mind. Because as he does you will be encouraged to pray always and not to give up.

WHO WE ARE IN COMMUNITY

But notice something else about 'who you are', namely that you're chosen as part of a community rather than just as an individual. Did you notice in the parable it was one widow, but in the application Jesus speaks not about an individual, but of the 'chosen ones' plural. Jesus wants all his disciples *together* to be praying always.

Notice too this mention of crying out '*day and night*' which I think points us to this same truth. Because in the Bible praying '*day and night*' may mean something more like 'in the morning' and 'in the evening', which goes right back to the morning and evening sacrifices at the Temple, In other words 'day and night' can point us to a regular, ongoing communal rhythm of prayer.

This is what you're doing here this morning, as you gather in God's presence and pray, as we pray for the church, the world and all those in need, and as you add your 'amens' to the prayers we bring.

Historically and traditionally the Sunday gathering of the church has flowed into times of morning and evening prayer in the Christian community. That's not so common in our Lutheran tradition these days. Perhaps all that might be left of this is the Mid-week Lenten services, or a Sunday evening prayer service.

And actually Luther's rhythm of morning and evening prayer is just another extension of this for the family. So perhaps this is encouragement is to be part of a praying community. This means it doesn't all rely on you, the individual. You are part of something bigger. The prayers of others can carry you along when you're losing heart, and vice versa. In fact we often learn to pray by being in the praying community of the church and the family.

Here's a hymn that prays:

The day Thou gavest, Lord, is ended, The darkness falls at Thy behest;
To Thee our morning hymns ascended, Thy praise shall sanctify our rest.

In that hymn it pictures the church in one part of the world finishing her prayers and going to sleep, as the church in another part of the world wakes up and continues the vigil of prayer, as the world rolls around. It's a beautiful picture. It's an encouraging reality, to know that while I sleep the saints of God on the other side of the world continue crying out to God, And so together as a body we are praying always, according to Jesus' promise that God will bring us justice quickly.

CONCLUSION – WILL HE FIND FAITH ON THE EARTH?

Now, as we begin to draw to a close, it is important to say that the justice God brings may not always look like what we think it should. He promises to bring justice, but not on our terms. Ultimately it's always, 'not my will, but yours be done'. And it's also worth remembering that our sense of things happening 'quickly' may be very different from God's. But after Jesus gave this teaching there was one thing that did happen quickly, and that is that Jesus went to the cross.

Which is ultimately how you know God is faithful to his promises, that he does hear the cries of his people day and night, because it's at the cross where God has brought justice to you, his people, once and for all. God has sent his Son to take on himself our unrighteousness, and in exchange to give us his perfect righteousness. God puts things right for us in Jesus' death and resurrection, God brings us justice for Christ's sake.

So, *'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'*

Jesus began by saying he was encouraging his disciples to keep on praying and not to lose heart. Now he ends by asking:

Will it happen?

Will his chosen ones give up?

Will they persevere in prayer?

Will faith be found on earth when he comes again?

In light of all we've just said, how do we hear this final question?

First, it's a challenge of sorts, a final word of strong encouragement. Christ is coming back to judge the world and take his own to be with him. And he wants, he expects, to find his people waiting in watchful, patient, ongoing prayer.

But then as well, this question can cause us to rejoice.

Because even though so many times in history it has seemed as if people were giving up on God, if Jesus returned today what would he find? He'd find faith on the earth. He would find faithful praying communities all over the world, even here in our congregation

I don't about you but I still get a buzz to go to a new place and visit a new congregation, and to find a community of chosen ones crying out to God day and night, a community who hasn't lost heart, a community of ongoing prayer.

God grant it to us all, in the name of Jesus, Amen.