First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

10/16/22

Perseverance

Luke 18:1-8

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

Last week I tried something different with the sermon and I, personally, wasn’t pleased with the results. Y’all were very kind about what I considered to be a less than successful effort, and I appreciate your forbearance. However, I don’t think I’m cut out to be one of those preachers who can deliver God’s word from notes or an outline. So, I’m back to writing the entire sermon out. Maybe, I’ll take another stab at outline preaching, at some point, but not today.

In today’s gospel, we find another one of those readings that only appears in Luke’s gospel. Whenever I’m reading Luke, I often wonder what the author’s source material was, as Luke was a contemporary of the Apostle Paul, and not a first hand witness to the events that he’s writing about. It’s highly likely that the parables and stories that make up most of the Lucan narrative were passed down, as oral tradition, and not actually put to paper until roughly some 40-50 years after the Cruxifixction. This timeline can create some interesting dynamics, when it comes to how we see and understand the writings that make up the New Testament, and that dynamic is something that is worthy of further exploration. Today, however, we’ll put that aside and focus on what we can learn from this particular story.

Today’s parable is, on the surface, pretty straightforward. A poor widow seeks justice from a corrupt judge, who neither fears God, nor respects people. But, when you dive deeper into this passage, there’s more going on, than a surface reading might indicate.

Here we have a widow. A woman who has absolutely no power, no money, and no property. Widows were among the most vulnerable, in Jewish society, because everything belonged to their husbands. When a man died, all of his property, money and possessions passed to his nearest male relative, and his widow was not allowed to inherit, losing whatever financial security that might have existed as a result of the marriage.

In this case, we don’t know what prompted the widow to seek justice from this judge and we have to assume that she had no sons, because if she had, the sons would have been the ones taking up their mother’s cause. What we do know, is that this person, who had no power and no resources, has gone to a judge seeking relief. We don’t know what the back story is. Now, there’s some confusion about whether she was the one being accused, as we see in the New Revised Standard translation, which is what I’m using, or if someone else has done her wrong, as other translations imply. Regardless, she’s here in front of a judge looking for help.

Now, this judge is not a nice man; he’s corrupt (read easily bribed), and doesn’t fear God or care for people. Makes me wonder how he became a judge, in the first place. He takes one look at this poor woman, who has nothing, and refuses her request out of hand. ‘Aww, get away from me, woman,’ I imagine the judge saying, ‘I don’t have time to listen to your silly complaint,’ ‘and besides, you don’t have any money to grease the skids, so there’s nothing in it for me!’ But the woman keeps coming back, day after day after day. Some of the commentaries speculate that she may have gone as far as to stand outside the judges house to argue her case as the judge leaves for work every single morning. Finally, the judge gets tired of the whole thing and says to himself, ‘Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming,’ and gives the woman, albeit begrudging, the justice, she has been so persistently pursuing.

We had some fun in the Bible study, on Tuesday, with the various translations of verse 5, where we see the judge giving in to the widow’s request for justice. One of the translations has the judge giving in because he’s afraid the woman would physically attack him, another translation has the judge fearing that the woman would slap his face, which is how an alternate translation that didn’t make it into the New Revised Standard translation puts it. But what’s very clear in all of the translations we looked at, is that this woman is a force to be reckoned with and the judge doesn’t want to be on the receiving end of that reckoning.

In the commentaries I looked at when I was preparing this sermon, the writers, without exception, contrast the reluctant judges response to the woman’s legitimate request for relief, with how God responds to those who “cry to him, day and night.” The contrast is very clear in verses 7 and 8, where we read, “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? **8**I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” And there’s the rub. It’s that word “quickly,” that so many of us trip over, when it comes to petitioning God for relief.

When we pray, day after day after day and it seems that God doesn’t hear us or refuses to answer us, how does that affect our faith? When we continually pray for healing and no healing occurs, what do we do then?

Some turn the supposed lack of response to their requests inward and blame themselves. “My faith must not be strong enough to warrant God’s attention.” They beat themselves up because they feel that they’ve somehow failed at this faith thing, and that if they had only tried harder, or done better, then God surely would hear them. Some argue that the lack of response, on God’s part, only serves to prove that God doesn’t exist. “If God really exists, then why isn’t God answering my prayers?” No response, for these folks, serves only to reinforce any doubts that they might have about the existence of God in their lives or in world.

Most weeks, during the Prayers of the People portion of our worship, you hear me acknowledge the fact that while God hears and answers *all* of our prayers, sometimes the answers aren’t the answers we’re hoping for. The other piece of that acknowledgement is this; sometimes the answer is not yet, or even no, as difficult as that may be to accept.

It’s not as if God is sitting on God’s throne up in heaven playing games with us. It’s not as if God’s saying, “Oh, that’s the answer you want?” “Well, how do you like this one instead?” And it’s not like God picks and chooses which prayers God answers, “Oh there’s Sally praying for a new bike, but Billy really, really wants that new puppy.” “I like Billy better than Sally, so I’ll give Billy what he wants.” That’s not the way God works.

I truly believe that God answers all of our prayers. I also believe that our prayers are answered on God’s time and not our own. And that brings us back to the word “quickly.”

In the first half of verse 8, Jesus tells his disciples that God will quickly grant justice. But here’s the thing, God’s understanding of quickly sometimes just doesn’t match up with our understanding of what’s quick or not.

Frankly, we shouldn’t be surprised by this. The God who has existed since before the universe came into being; the God who *created* the universe will, of course, have a different understanding of time than we will. The hymn reminds us that a thousand ages in God's sight, are like an evening gone.

So, what does all of this mean for us? Do we give up on prayer? Do we stop asking for God’s help? What would have happened to the poor widow if she had simply given up? If she had, would she have received the justice she so badly needed? It was her faith, in the face of overwhelming rejection by someone who couldn’t have cared less about her circumstance, which allowed her to persist, persevere and ultimately prevail.

The widow had no idea when, or even if, her petition would be answered. None at all, and yet that didn’t stop her because she had faith that justice would be done. In spite of the deck being stacked against her, she had faith persistence would pay off.

When it seems that God doesn’t listen, or respond to our needs, it’s easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. It’s easy to blame ourselves, or even doubt the existence of God. And yes, it’s tough to accept that sometimes the answer to our heartfelt cries is not yet.

I do believe that when the answer to our prayers is not yet, God has a reason for responding that way. Perhaps Sally doesn’t get the bike she’s praying for, because she needs to grow up a bit before she can take on the responsibility to care for it. Perhaps, not yet means we aren’t in a place to fully appreciate what the answer to our prayer will be.

Perseverance and faith go hand in hand. Without faith, the widow wouldn’t have had the perseverance to get the justice she needed. It’s the same for us. Without faith, we are unable to see past an answer of not yet to our prayers. So persist in faith, siblings in Christ. Don’t get discouraged or impatient when the answer is not yet. If the answer to heartfelt prayers is not yet, know that there’s a reason for the delay. Don’t give up hope. Know that God has a plan and it *will* work out in God’s time, not ours. AMEN