

Reading Parables in a Pandemic, part 3 “THE WIDOW AND THE JUDGE”

Luke 18:1-8

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“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart.” Of all the parables Jesus told, this one must have struck a chord with his audience. Occupied Israel, vassal nation to the Roman Empire, the religious structure reformed to increase Rome’s control over the people. The king of the Jews appointed by Rome used the religious leadership to strip the people of their wealth (what little they had) and line his own coffers and appease the emperor. For six hundred years they suffered these and worse indignities under the Babylonians, the Persians, the Medes, and the Greeks. They’d seen their temple desecrated numerous times and were within a few decades of seeing it destroyed for a second time when Jesus told this parable.

“Their need to pray and not lose heart.” They had found security in Egypt during a great famine through the generosity of Joseph, but four hundred years later, they were slaves providing the hard labor necessary for Pharaoh’s huge building projects. And when Pharaoh began to fear them as their numbers multiplied, he ordered the deaths of the newborns.

How did they do it: keep up the prayer, keep crying out to the Lord, keep hoping? Jesus tells them that even the unjust judge will eventually grant justice if you make enough noise. He tells widowed Israel to keep making noise.

I think when we hear Jesus’ instruction to always pray, we draw this image of a people on their knees with hands folded talking to God in polite tones. There’s none of that in this parable. Prayer, here, is the widow’s persistent returning to the judge demanding justice. Prayer means protest. This kind of prayer is hard, so hard that Jesus recognizes that most people cannot sustain it. “Will the Son of Man find faith on the earth?” Will everyone have lost heart?

A lot of us are losing heart in the midst of this pandemic. But others have more reason to grow weary. Indigenous people have been crying out for justice since this country was first colonized. Many died from European diseases. Some were enslaved. All have had to relocate their homes, becoming refugees multiple times. The trail of tears being perhaps the most poignant image of their cries. Even today they must use the courts to maintain sovereignty over their land and are losing those battles. The pandemic has struck some native communities hard exposing the inadequacy of healthcare on some native lands.

Millions of Muslims are crying out from “education camps” in Western China. Millions of others around the world continue to be treated with suspicion and suffer assaults for their faith. Refugees struggle to find sanctuary as they flee wars they never asked for.

Children from impoverished communities are crying out for justice; victims of malnutrition, famine, war, inadequate healthcare, and sub-standard educational opportunities.

Victims of gun violence and their families are crying out for justice, wondering when politicians will step away from the money game to enact legislation that makes this country safer.

The earth itself is crying out for justice from its polluted waters, its toxic air and poisoned soil. Hurricanes, droughts, forest fires, sea level rise are asking us when we will take our role as stewards of the earth more seriously.

We all hear the cries of African Americans wondering when society will reward police officers for de-escalation and removing those who continue to insist on the use of overwhelming force to address conflict. When will we address the inequities in the criminal justice system.

There is no shortage of voices crying out for justice. One grows weary, loses heart with so many crying out and so few listening. We live in a world where the judges do not seem to grow weary of denying justice. How can we not lose heart?

And in this time of pandemic, how can we not grow weary? With cases rising in nearly every state, the country persists in reopening efforts. Many churches contemplate returning to in-person worship because we have grown weary of the rules intended to protect us. We want to dine in restaurants again, gather for celebrations, embrace friends and lose the mask. We'd probably even prefer to hear the morning campaign report than the daily Covid-19 update. There seems to be no end in sight for the pandemic and no answer to the cries for justice. Weary, weary, weary.

“Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart.” If we fail in these things, the result will be the loss of faith on the earth. When the voices go silent, the case is lost.

The cries for justice are not just angry voices. They are the voices of hope. As long as these prayers continue, injustice cannot win. The persistent widow wins every time. The consequence of failure is serious, but in God's world injustice has less staying power than the cries for justice. Certainly we have seen that injustice has great stamina, but the prayers of the widow endure longer.

It took forty years of squabbling for the Presbyterian Church to welcome gay and lesbian Christians into full partnership. It took longer to end slavery in this country. Many of the struggles for justice have been going on for centuries. The Jews of Jesus' day had been occupied for six centuries. That's why there is a “need” to pray “always.” That's why Jesus needs to remind his audience that the persistent widow wins every time.

And the widow wins every time because this is God's world. It doesn't belong to the caretakers of injustice. They will become weary because God hears the cries of the victims of injustice and will answer them.

So keep praying, talking, protesting and while you're at it, do some listening too. It's not in the parable, but I think it's part of the interaction between justice and injustice. Not every cry for justice flows out of our personal experience. In fact for most of us, we have very little to complain about. But we can add our prayers to the cries of other widows. And we can't add our protest if we're not listening. So pray, listen, and don't lose heart. This is God's world and the persistent widow will be heard. Amen.