

Sermon for Sunday, October 16, 2022  
Steven Horst, Ph.D.  
Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown, CT

**Luke 18:1-8**

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, '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.'" And the Lord 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?"

- Last week, our guest preacher, the Reverend Carlton Giles, gave us a rousing sermon on the theme, "God knows how to get things done."
- To be honest, there were times this week, when I was staring at a stack of papers to grade and a blank page for this sermon, thought I thought maybe I should ask God to teach me a little bit of that, about how to get things done. But that would be a different sermon.
- But there is a connection between today's lessons and Reverend Giles's theme.
- Today's readings also assure us God gets things done – but it's not about all of the times God get things done.
- Sometimes God does wonderful and unexpected things that we've never even thought of.

- But today's lessons aren't about those.
- They're about the times when God responds to people who are persistent in prayer.
- Jacob wrestles with God, and won't let go until God gives Jacob His blessing.
- Paul exhorts a young bishop named Timothy to be persistent.
- And in the Gospel, we hear about a persistent widow and an unrighteous judge.
- It's probably a story you already know well, but let's run through it.
- The widow has been wronged by one of her neighbors in some way – we're never told just what it was – so she goes to the court to ask the judge to give her justice.
- But this judge isn't really much of a judge – he doesn't care about his job of dispensing justice and making things right.
- He doesn't even put on a pretense of doing so, because he doesn't care what people think either.
- He doesn't even care what God thinks.
- And evidently he doesn't want to be bothered by things like some poor widow lady telling him her troubles, and how she was wronged, and expecting him to do something about it, even though that's precisely what his job is as a judge, ... and so he brushes her aside.

- He probably treats most people the same way, and most of them figure “Well, not going to get any justice here,” and give up.
- But not this woman
- Every morning, when they open up the doors of the court, there she is again.
- You can just imagine the judge thinking “Oh no, not *her* again, won’t she *ever* give up and go away?”
- But she won’t. She’s persistent.
- And you can imagine him finally deciding, one day, “This is really getting to me. She’s driving me nuts. Bring her forward, and let’s get this over with so I can finally have some peace.”
- It’s one of those wonderful vivid stories Jesus tells in a few sentences, stories we can imagine and relate to and remember in their own right years later.
- And, like all of Jesus’ parables, it has a spiritual point.
- People call on God to remedy the things that have gone wrong in their worlds, too.
- And sometimes we do it for a long time, and nothing seems to happen.
- We might start thinking, God knows how to get things done, why hasn’t it happened?
- Maybe God doesn’t care.

- Maybe God is like the judge, and doesn't care about justice.
- Or maybe God doesn't care about me.
- Or maybe, as I've heard some people say, "I don't pray, because God is too busy with other problems, the world's BIG problems, and so I don't want to bother him with my little problems."
- Or maybe I'm asking for the wrong thing.
- Or maybe God's left us to work out our own problems until Jesus comes again and sets everything right at once.
- And to this, Jesus says "no".
- God cares deeply about injustice – in fact, he cares about it even more than any of us do.
- God cares about our well-being.
- And He hears our prayers, and wants us to pray.
- When God sees me kneel down to pray for the same thing I've prayed for every day for years, He's not rolling his eyes.
- He doesn't wish I'd just go away and stop bothering him.
- No, Jesus assures us
  - 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.

- But then there is one more sentence he adds, and it's a curious one: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"
- I've always been a bit puzzled by this – what does this question have to do with the parable Jesus has just told?
- When Jesus speaks of "when the Son of Man comes", is he talking about his presence there in ancient Israel (he was the Son of man after all, and he had come, even if no one knew it yet)– or perhaps whenever he comes to a particular place or person?
- Or does it refer to the promise that Jesus will return and create a new heaven and a new earth? Is he talking about that future time?
- Probably the first readers of Luke's Gospel assumed Jesus was coming back within their own lifetimes, like next week or next year, and believed he would wipe away every injustice when he did.
- They were often victims of persecutions, (remember Paul wrote half of his letters from prison and John wrote in exile on the island of Patmos), but they weren't trying to overthrow the cruel Roman Empire that had crucified Jesus and killed so many of the saints.
- Their new way of life was a revolution in itself, but they were not political revolutionaries.
- They cried "Come, Lord Jesus", and hoped it would be soon.
- But if it happened within their lifetimes ... on the timetable of history, that was quickly granting justice if it meant undoing all the injustices in the world in the foreseeable future.

- They believed that God would get things done – and thought it would be in their lifetimes – and they were a small persecuted group, and so solving the world’s injustices was not their priority.
- Instead, they were busy trying to get people ready for this – to spread the Gospel, and to become more just and righteous people themselves, and to help others do so as well.
- That is what Paul is trying to encourage a young Bishop named Timothy about in the Epistle.
  - 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.
- 
- Again, persistence, not only in prayer but in proclamation and teaching and encouragement, and doing it all with patience.
- 
- And yesterday, at the installation of Jeffrey Mello as the new Bishop of Connecticut, we similarly prayed that “That by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit he may be sustained and encouraged to persevere to the end”
- So perhaps to the early Christians, this last sentence of today’s Gospel meant something like this:
- your prayers for justice will be fully answered when Jesus comes.
- The question is whether people have faith to receive Him, and whether you have faithfully carried out your work on that day?

- Your job is to do the Lord's work, and yes to pray, and to be persistent in it.
- The point isn't that we shouldn't worry about injustice – oh no.
- It's clear in the Bible that God cares a lot about justice, and that means we should too.
- We should work for it, and we should pray for it.
- The point, rather, is that the road to justice is sometimes long and uncertain, so we have to be persistent.
- Don't give up because something hasn't happened yet.
- Or because it seems too big.
- Or because you're tired and worn out.
- Be like Jacob and wrestle with God all night – or even all life long --- if you have to, not letting go even if you're hurt and wounded.
- Show the kind of faith the widow in the parable had – a faith that got her to go out every day and do what she needed to do in order to try to bring about justice.
- Surely she was praying every day too, but she was also speaking up for what was right, whether it was a good day or a bad day, whether people wanted to hear about it or not.
- Paul similarly urges Timothy to preach the Good News and exhort people “whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.”
-

- It took a long time to abolish the injustice of slavery, and to get women the right to vote.
- And at first, the people who were working and praying for it were about as popular as the early Christians were in Rome. The times were, in Paul's words, unfavorable.
- But if they'd given up, it never would have happened.
- Thank God they were persistent.
- The Reverend Martin Luther King said that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.
- A wonderful saying.
- But let me put it slightly differently.
- Imagine it's not just as an arc, but a bow.
- A bow is supposed to bend, and it aims at something, and God intends the world to be a just place.
- God plans to bring about justice, to bend the bow and shoot at the target.
- But maybe He wants us to help, and we have to supply some of the pull to make it bend.
- And it's a big bow – we can't just do it in a moment, and we can't do it alone: that's why, above all, we've got to pray.

- Sometimes you can get justice by taking something to a judge – one who, unlike the judge in the parable, really cares about justice.
- But often it only happens when a lot of people change their minds and God softens their hearts.
- We help do some of that by proclaiming what we hear Jesus telling us, gently and with love.
- so we have to be persistent, like Jacob, and Timothy, and the widow in the Gospel.
- But ultimately it is God who changes hearts and minds, so we also have to be persistent in prayer as well.
- 
- Oh Lord, help us to love justice as you love it, and to discern what is truly just and what is unjust.
- Give us the grace we need to pray for it persistently,
- and the wisdom, courage and patience we need to work for it
- And bring about true Justice, God's justice, by your grace and mighty power.
- Amen.
- 
-