

Sermon Notes October 16th, 2022

Sermon Text: Luke 18:1-8

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8, The Message

18 1-3 Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. He said, “There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: ‘My rights are being violated. Protect me!’

4-5 “He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, ‘I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won’t quit badgering me, I’d better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I’m going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.’”

6-8 Then the Master said, “Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won’t step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won’t he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?”

Sermon

We are continuing to follow Jesus and the disciples to Jerusalem. It has been a long journey. I hope that we have been able to gain much insight from the stories that Luke has shared.

Today, we are in chapter eighteen and we get to hear another parable. In many bibles, there are headings to introduce you to what you will be reading. In most bibles this passage is labeled by the following:

The Story of the Persistent Widow

In the beginning, the parable is encouraging the disciples to keep on praying with conviction. They are to do this in spite of the dark and difficult times that they are facing and will be facing in the very near future.

The message extends to us today. When we are facing difficult times in our individual lives and the life of our congregation, we need to be persistent in our prayer lives. So, we must ask, when we are faced with difficulties; do we go to God in persistent prayer. In our Tuesday morning bible study, 1 Thessalonians 5:17 was lifted up where we hear the words: *“pray continually.”*

In the parable, there are simply two individuals. We have **the judge and widow**. This morning, I want to give you a little backstory and history that may help us understand the multifaceted meanings behind the parable.

The judge is described as an individual who does not fear God and has no respect for individuals. This should be shocking. In Deuteronomy, we hear that judges were considered wise and reputable. In 1 Chronicles, they would have understood that they were commissioned by God to shepherd God’s people. Then they would have known from Proverbs that fearing the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Thus, it seems like he is completely unfit for the position that he is holding.

Then, we have the widow. She has no power nor authority. Throughout the bible, we can see that widows symbolizes the powerless and the vulnerable. Because of this, the Torah demands special care for them. If we want to be specific, in Deuteronomy, there is a specific command. The command is the following: *“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow’s garment in pledge.”*

With knowledge and understanding the life of a judge and the life of the widow; the following statement would be true in individuals’ hearts:

The prophets considered rendering justice to widows as being loyal to the covenant.

In this story though, we see that even though the widow is vulnerable and is a victim of an injustice; even though we do not know what has happened to her; that she is bold and relentless in her demand for justice.

We are not sure what is happening exactly. Biblical judges were charged with the responsibility of hearing complaints fairly and impartially. That is not happening here. The judge is refusing to hear her case. The widow keeps pressing him. It seems like the standoff may have continued for some time. She was resilient and did not give up.

In the end, the judge gives up and gives in and renders her justice.

Once again, we lose some of the story in the translation. The translators translate the story so it is easier to read. However, in the original language, Jesus may be using some exaggerated humor. What we really should be reading is that the judge rendered her justice because he was scared and afraid that she was going to be punched in the eye and left with a black eye.

The exaggerated humor though is not just there for some comic relief. Instead the humor that Jesus injects into this passage is poking fun at the powers-that-be. There is an upending of the unjust system that was stacked against the widows, orphans and immigrants. In the 21st century, there are political cartoons that encourage us to laugh at those who wield power unethically. Now, the reasoning behind the laugh is to challenge us. We should laugh and then challenge the system and offer a different way to live life.

Jesus then flips the story and instead of us hearing what words the judge gave to the widow, we hear Jesus sharing with them that God will render swift justice. In this story and throughout Luke, justice is at the heart of the narrative.

We can take the theme of the passage and relive our baptismal promises when we promise that **we will strive for justice and peace in all the earth.**

When we looked at justice and the chosen ones at our Tuesday's bible study, it brought up some uncertainty. The aspect of certainty that I can bring is that it is the widow who is cast in the image of God and not the judge. When we then look at the widow and her persistence, **we can see that for Luke, persistence is about prayer with faith.** Prayer is the essential medium to strengthen faith and undo injustice and evil acts in the world.

I think that it might be a good exercise for you to take a look around and see what injustices you notice and begin praying for them. The Tuesday morning bible study came up with a few and I challenged them to pray about and over those injustice. Your prayers may lead you to action. Many times in our society, I believe that individuals become weary of the customary "thoughts and prayers" to you. The reason is simply that they do not see an action tied to the prayers.

It could be argued that Jesus is making a connection between prayer-making, justice-seeking, and God's mercy. Dorthie Soelle talks about borrowing the eyes of God when we pray. The thought is borrowing the eyes of God allows us to pray with our eyes wide open as opposed to our eyes closed, being fully present to the many injustices that people face daily, much like the persistent widow in our passage today.

On Tuesday, I told the bible study group that I came across a name that I was not aware of and was just introduced to them. I shared with them that currently, I just know his quote and not his story. I then shared with them that I wanted to learn about him and maybe he would make my sermon. Well, I did some research and became extremely fascinated with his story. Let me share with you the quote that stood out and then his story.

The quote: **"I felt my legs were praying"**

The quote came from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel. These were the words that he used when he was reflecting on his participation in the 1965 civil right march from Selma to Montgomery. During his reflection, he concluded that prayer itself can literally embody action.

So, I hope you do not mind but I want to take a few minutes and introduce you to Rabbi A.J. Herschel. He was a Polish-born American rabbi who became one of the leading Jewish theologians of the 20th century. He was born in Warsaw in 1907. He had five older siblings. His dad died when he was 9 years old from Influenza 1916. Following his dad's death, he was tutored by many and the mentorships formed him greatly. His education path took him to the University of Berlin where he did his doctorate and received his rabbinic ordination.

When he was 31 years old and living in Frankfurt, his life began to change forever. He was arrested by the Gestapo and deported back to Poland. He spent ten months in Poland teaching at the Warsaw's Institute for Jewish Studies. Six weeks before the German invasion of Poland, Heschel left Warsaw for London with the help of the president of Hebrew Union College who had been working to obtain visas for Jewish scholars in Europe. The president of the college secretly re-wrote AJ's ordination certificate to meet American visa requirements.

He arrived in New York City in March 1940 and had various teaching positions. His family suffered greatly during WWII. Heschel's sister Esther was killed in a German bombing. His mother was murdered by the Nazis, and two other sisters, Gittel and Devorah, died in Nazi concentration camps. He never returned to Germany, Austria or Poland. It was too painful for him.

As he studied the Hebrew prophets and wrestled with the injustices that were occurring, he sensed that people of faith must make strong requests for something to happen when we encounter injustices. Thus, for him, inspired by this belief, he worked for African Americans' civil rights and spoke out against the Vietnam War.

For us today, I think that we can take a look at the life of Rabbi AJ Herschel and the life of the persistent widow and realize that prayer can and must be so much more than what it has become for many. When we look at the parable of the persistent widow specifically; we see a woman who doesn't give up. Can we take the next step in our faith life and our prayer life and remember that authentic prayer is faith in action?

Let me conclude with question that Jesus concluded with: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The answer to this question is yes. It may be in the unexpected places though. Throughout the scriptures, we find it in the outsiders, the unlovely, the unclean, and the ones who were certain of their sinfulness.

I am still meditating and pondering on the words of my colleague Meda Stamper. Perhaps the parable suggests that a sign of faith will be a willingness to persist in prayer, as we see in this widow who persists against all odds in her fight for justice against the powerful judge.

May we as individuals and as a congregation be willing to fight for the injustices that we see and at times, individuals may worry that we are crossing a line and at those times, may we remember that we, as Lutherans, are simply living out our baptismal vows. **AMEN.**