

Luke 18: 1-8 “Living the Prayer”

Right at the outset of today’s pericope, we are told what this parable is about; it is about the need to pray always and not to lose heart, Luke tells us. If even an unjust judge who couldn’t care less about the plight of the widow granted her what she demanded, just to put an end to her incessant appeal, how much more would our God of justice do to help us when we cry out to God day and night? Surely Our God would act quickly to come to our aid. So, don’t give up praying, don’t get discouraged, just keep asking, okay? Got it? Good. That was simple. Ready for the next parable?

Not so fast. If that were all there is to this parable, we could easily fall into thinking ‘God would answer our prayers IF we only prayed hard enough and long enough.’ And that’s a dangerous trapping... you and I know from experience that we don’t always get exactly what we prayed for. Are we to conclude that God doesn’t care then? Of course, not. We don’t get to twist God’s arm to give us what we want, because God wants to give us what is best.

If we step back to read the parable in the context and ask why was Jesus telling this parable to begin with, and to whom? And if we pay attention to the details in the story, like, why a widow, and what

exactly was the widow asking for --- we may see a message that is deeper, transformative, even.

I said we are told at the outset what this parable is about, but actually, Luke starts with the word “Then.” “Then Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.” Who was Jesus responding to with this parable?

In the section before this passage, Jewish leaders were asking Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming. And Jesus’s answer was that the kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be seen or noticed, because the kingdom of God is within you, or among you, as in “you all.” The kingdom of God, where God’s justice of love and mercy and compassion prevail over injustice, IS already among us, Jesus was telling them.

Yet, both in Jesus’s time and in the time Luke was writing this Gospel for the early church, the reality of the kingdom of God was not what they were experiencing. (I might ask how about our time?) Under the unjust system of the Roman Empire, life was hard and unfair for the ethnic and religious minorities, like the Jews, including Jesus’s followers. And among Luke’s community of the early church, many

were being persecuted and killed. It's not surprising then, is it, if they were starting to lose heart? Where is the kingdom of God? Would it ever come?

When Jesus used the figure of a "widow" in the parable, much more was meant than just a woman who had lost her husband. In the ancient Israel, widows were the most vulnerable members of the community, along with orphans and foreigners. A widow was stripped of the support of her husband, and yet, the inheritance went to the dead man's sons or brothers. On her own, she had no power, no right, no social standing.

And, in that society, the judge had the responsibility to hear complaints of the small and the great alike, and it was his duty to maintain harmony and resolve disputes. The judge was to declare God's judgment and to restore God's Shalom, the wholeness of the community, and a just Judge would have a deep regard for the tradition of caring for those in need, like a widow, just as God had mercy on Israelites when they were in bondage.

Clearly, this unjust judge in the parable was completely unfit for the office. A situation that can happen in any age. He is the epitome of

corruption, and yet the poor widow's fate is completely in his hands. Oh, the injustice of it. They knew the taste of such injustice very well, as might some of us. Their world looked more like the world of this persistent widow and the unjust judge, than the kingdom of God. What about our world, I wonder.

So Jesus told this parable to teach them the need to pray always and not to lose heart. The persistence of the widow caused even the unjust judge to finally grant her....what? "Justice against her opponent." Jesus says that if the unjust judge grant justice to her after a while, even if it's for a selfish reason and not out of compassion for the widow, our God who is just would surely grant us justice without delay.

Yes, the parable is about the need to pray always, but not for whatever we want, but for justice, because God's justice of love, mercy and compassion, is a sign of the kingdom of God, and God wants to give us that kingdom.

This parable is a twin to the parable of the persistent neighbor, which Luke included earlier in the Gospel. Remember the story of a man who goes out in the middle of the night to ask his neighbor to give

him some loaves of bread? The neighbor is annoyed but would give him what he's asking because he's persistent. That parable was about "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." Yet, in that parable, the man persisted in asking his neighbor for some bread, because it was for his traveler friend who just arrived at the door, hungry. The kingdom of God is where we love our neighbor as ourselves.

The persistent widow was asking for justice for herself, standing up for herself; she models for us how we should love ourselves. The persistent neighbor was asking for bread for his friend; he models for us how we should love our neighbor. We know what their prayers were because they are lived out in their actions. They lived their prayers.

How we live out our prayers has something to do with the kingdom of God being within us. And when our prayers are being lived out, when our prayers are more than a wishful thinking, we are engaged with the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God is among us, and we need not lose heart, there is no delay, even as our daily reality outside is full of injustice.

If our prayer life is so central to the kingdom of God being within us, how are we to pray, so that we don't lose heart? For that, Jesus is the model to be imitated. Luke shows us Jesus praying throughout his Gospel. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus "when Jesus had been baptized and was praying." He opened himself up to God and the voice came saying "You are my Son, the Beloved." Jesus often removed himself from the crowds to quiet places to pray. He prayed all night in the mountains before choosing the twelve disciples. He taught to pray for those who abused them. The night he was betrayed, he prayed to God that this cup be removed from him, but only if it were God's will. And, on the cross, he prayed to God to forgive those who put him there.

Jesus's prayer life shows us that Prayer is our intentional opening ourselves up to God, that the Holy Spirit may enter in. In Prayer, we discern what God is calling us to do. In Prayer, we let God know our desires, fears and concerns, and at the same time seek God's will, not our own. Through prayer, we seek the world to come in alignment with God's will, including ourselves and our abusers. And the world in alignment with God's will is what Justice looks like. In the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, the first thing to ask, after addressing and

praising God, is “Thy kingdom Come; Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

So, in prayer, we let God’s will rule our hearts so that we are moved to live accordingly, to act obediently, always opening ourselves to God, and inviting the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. Such prayer becomes a way of life for Christians. By praying such prayers always, we become ever conscious of God who keeps our life, as the psalmist says, so we never lose heart.

St. Paul tells us not to “not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We may not be able to twist God’s arm with our prayers, but through prayers, if they are like the ones Jesus prayed, we are transformed so that what we desire match more closely what God desires for us, and for our world.

Who are the widows in our day? Where do we see people suffering, trapped in the system that is making their life difficult? Where do we need to seek justice and how do we get it, and for whom? What does “keeping coming back to the judge” look like, if we are to live our prayer? Going to the voting booth? Planning a fund-raiser for some cause? Standing up for the vulnerable population in our community? The answers to these questions are not for me to tell you, but for you to pray for always.

But these are also the questions for us as a church to be asking, as we are the body of Christ. If we are a praying congregation, how do we live out the People’s prayer we pray at the end of the service?

May we live that prayer always, and not lose heart.