

Sermon Luke 18: 1-18 October 16, 2016
October Sermon Series "Learn from the Master"

One day Jesus told His disciples a story to illustrate their need for constant prayer and to show them that they must keep praying until the answer comes. "There was a city judge," Jesus said, "a very godless man who had great contempt for everyone. A widow of that city came to him frequently to appeal for justice against a man who had harmed her. The judge ignored her for a while, but eventually she got on his nerves. "I fear neither God nor man," he said to himself, "but this woman bothers me. I'm going to see that she gets justice, for she is wearing me out with her constant coming!" Then the Lord said, "If even an evil judge can be worn down like that, don't you think that God will surely give justice to God's people who plead with God day and night? Yes! God will answer them quickly! But the question is: When I, the Messiah, return, how many will I find who have faith?"

October's Verse for the Soul: Matthew 11:28-30

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

"One day Jesus told his disciples a story to illustrate their need for constant prayer and to show them that they must keep praying until the answer comes." A slightly different translation says, "Jesus told the disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." I think that losing heart is a worldwide crisis. I remind us to pray with the news and yet there is almost always something in the Chronicle or on NPR - somewhere in the world - that makes me feel heartsick and hopeless. Sometimes it's a picture of a little Syrian boy, shell-shocked, covered in blood and dust, sitting in an emergency vehicle. Sometimes it's a story of a young police officer, just returning from maternity leave, who's shot and killed in a domestic disturbance. Sometimes it's the staggering number of refugees, from Iraq alone it's over three million people, looking for somewhere, anywhere, safe to live. Sometimes what's heartrending is closer to home,

like the number of children in Contra Costa County alone, 38,000 of them, who live below the poverty level. Sometimes it's the priorities of families who never miss a Sunday at the soccer field or the community pool, but don't value faith, or a faith community, as a part of a healthy life. Sometimes it's the awful things Christians say in the name of Jesus. But Jesus told a story about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.

There was a widow, Jesus said... and you have a picture of her in your bulletin. There was a widow who pleaded, persistently, before an unjust judge day and night for justice. She wouldn't give up. What we know about women in the ancient world is that they had no rights, so why this woman didn't know that she had no rights is a mystery. She could own nothing and had no power. Her husband's property had transferred to his sons, or to his brothers, but not to her. She was dependent on the men in her family to care for her needs, and if that didn't work she starved, or she sold herself.

There was a widow, Jesus said... and you have a picture of her. She pleaded persistently before an unjust judge day and night. Jesus said the judge had no respect for anyone – God included - but the widow wore him out. I wonder if Jesus' eyes twinkled when he said this... and if the women who were listening to Him were laughing inwardly. The widow pleaded before an unjust judge and she would not give up, and finally out of concern for himself, the judge heard her and judged in her favor, because she was wearing him out.

There was a widow, Jesus said... and you have a picture of her. She pleaded persistently before an unjust judge day and night... and he heard her, and acted in her favor. Jesus said, "If even an evil judge can be worn down like that, don't you think that

God will surely give justice to God's people who plead with God day and night? Yes! God will answer them quickly!"

It's a nice parable but this is the tricky part of the gospel: Jesus said that God is quick to grant justice. Justice means "right order" which is akin to God's shalom, which is not just peace, but "right order": fairness, health, hope, wholeness for all the world. It's what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer, whether or not we realize that "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," is persistently pleading with God to bring "right order" to the world. But there is no right order in the world. It doesn't matter which news source you follow; the world is in heartrending, disheartening, disorder.

Jesus however... had the long-view. He looked past lepers, banished and feared, and saw children of God in need of touch and healing. He looked past simple fishermen, and saw the church. He looked past the lies and betrayal of a friend, and saw Peter, whom Jesus trusted with a mission to go into all the world. Jesus looked past agony and crucifixion, and saw resurrection and eternal life. Jesus had the long-view and He knew that God's kingdom is coming, that God's will is being done, and the world is being set in right order.

I wonder if faces fell when Jesus finished the parable and told His listeners that God is fairer and quicker to answer cries for justice than the unjust judge. I wonder if the women - who like the widow in the parable had no legal voice, no vote, couldn't own property, couldn't inherit their husbands' estates - I wonder if women who'd been listening to Jesus say that God is quick to answer cries for justice, were thinking to themselves, "Yeah, right." Because right away, Jesus addresses this concern, this

natural skepticism: He said, “When the Messiah comes (speaking of Himself and His return) will He find faith on earth?”

This month I’m preaching on learning from the Master, Jesus. Jesus taught His followers (and His critics) about the demands of discipleship... about following Him, and being transformed by God’s love, and sharing that love with friends and enemies and all the world. Some of Jesus’ demands (maybe all of them) are us responding in kind to what God has already given us: love, mercy, forgiveness, help in time of need, and interestingly, perseverance.

It seems that perseverance is something God first gives us, for God never gives up on us. Beloved family and friends die, places of employment can fire us or retire us, families can practice tough-love and shut their doors to us; all human relationships are finite. But God’s love is persistent and unshakable and never-ending. God never stops pursuing us, longing to be in relationship with us, wanting to transform us with love... wanting to transform the world around us, through us.

The world is not in right order, nor was it when Jesus was talking with His disciples and friends. But He had the long-view. He saw the kingdom coming. And Jesus looks at you and me and sees past our half-hearted discipleship and our fainthearted love for God and others, and He sees that we are, by God’s grace, being transformed into lives of godliness by practicing and experiencing love, mercy, service, thankfulness and perseverance. Praying is and always has been hard work, as is not losing heart in our hopeless world. Praying means hopeful trusting in God and not in ourselves.

There was a widow, Jesus said... and you have a picture of her. She went before an uncaring and indifferent judge, hoping against all odds, persistent, determined, and relentless. This is who we are, as believers, as followers of Jesus Christ: we keep praying, hoping against all odds, persistent, determined, and relentless... because the Holy Spirit has given us the courage to pray without ceasing, without losing heart, in a brokenhearted world.

There was a widow, Jesus said... and you have a picture of her to remind you to pray persistently. Pray for the people of the world, pray for the world to be in “right order”, pray to be the hands and feet and wallet of God... pray that all you have and all you are God will use to build God’s kingdom, to transform hopelessness and heartbrokenness with love.

This month we have a scripture to learn, to say over and over until we know it by heart (which is different than memorizing it. To know something by heart is to take it in and give it a place to live in you.) You’ll find the scripture on page 3 of the bulletin, about half way down the page. Jesus said these words, and they are meant for us as we walk with Him, and learn from Him, as serve, as we forgive, and as we are thankful, and as we are persistent in prayer.

Let’s read it together, starting with the words, “Jesus said.” [Jesus said] “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” Amen.