

1 Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent.' 4 For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 31:31-34

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³¹ "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to ^[d] them, ^[e]" declares the LORD. ³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

This is the word of the Lord... **THANKS BE TO GOD**

“Perseverance”

One day, years ago, after our youngest son, Nathan, began working at a vet clinic, he mentioned that there was there a pair of Great Pyrenees puppies. They had been found abandoned along the side of the road. I commented that I hoped they’d be adopted. We bemoaned the heartlessness of people who would abandon puppies like that. The next day, I was given more of the story: there was a male and a female in the pair, and the male had long white hair, the female shorter hair. I commented again that that was nice. A week or so went by and I was told that one of the other vet techs was adopting the male puppy. I had a hunch where the conversation was going so I hit it off at the pass by saying that we already had a dog, and I sure hoped the female would find a good home. Later the next week, the question came outright, *“Mom can we adopt the puppy? Dr. Gosney says it won’t get THAT big. It wasn’t getting adopted otherwise. It was totally wrong for someone to have dumped it along the side of the road. Every day that goes by, it is less likely to be adopted, especially since it’s a mix. It has been given it’s shots and now was spayed.”* “No”, I said as gently but firmly as I could. Pretty soon, the text messages started. *“Please”. “Please, I’ll take care of her”. “It’ll be a good training for me.”* “No, you’ll be going to college in a couple of years, and your dad and I will be left to care for two dogs!” I said. Then the pictures began being texted. Ahhh. I could feel my nerve weakening. Any edge I had softening. She WAS adorable. Maybe Ruby, our other dog WOULD like the company. Finally, I said. “Well, you’ll need to check with your dad.” *“Oh, I already have, and he said it’s ok if it’s ok with you!”* (pause) I had no other cards to play. “Well, I’ll come over and talk with Dr. Gosney”. Of course, we both knew that this meant that I’d virtually said, “yes”. It was nearly done. Once I saw the puppy, I fell in love with too and it did need a home. “Epic” is 11 now and a beloved 75 lb member of our family.

Today’s text is about perseverance. Jesus told his disciples a parable about a fiercely determined widow who persevered. She was in a bad way...living in poverty, without influence, resources, or power. and suffering significant injustice. She put her case before a judge, only this judge was a horrible one. He was without an inner moral compass. He did not believe in God, nor did he care. He couldn’t be bothered by this widow. Likely even very strong men dreaded

appearing in his court, and lawyers treaded softly as they approached his bench. However, the widow persisted with her request...she persevered even beyond being a pest. The judge characterized her actions as those of a boxer. In the original Greek, the translation of the judge's comments are, "*because this widow causes trouble for me, I will give her justice, so that she may not, in the end, give me a black eye by her coming.*"¹ The English translations tend to soften the boxing metaphors, yet the judge was worn down by the persistence of the woman. He finally ruled in her favor, "*I will see that she gets justice.*"

Now, this parable has been misinterpreted by readers over time, mostly because it's been thought to be an allegory. Parts should not be assigned here. God is not the unjust judge. That would be contrary to the divine character revealed in the whole body of scripture. And we are not the widow, out to pester God. NO, this parable was told to the listeners at that time, and all those since, in order to teach followers what prayer is like.

We all, you see, are like the original listeners who had been taught to pray and had been experiencing persecution and hardship. They'd prayed for many things which they did not always receive...safety, protection from threatening powers, comfort and relief in the wake of yet another disaster. They wondered, like we do, if it was right to pray for health and work and prosperity? They were weary of praying over a sick child or a dying parent, and watching them get no better, and they were losing heart.

By means of this parable, Jesus assured them that there is hope in prayer, and it is founded in the character of God, the One who delivers justice....God delivers justice, not the blind tit for tat kind of justice, but the state of harmony kind of justice wherein all creation can flourish as God intended.² Jesus said that God delivers justice and does so WILLINGLY to those who seek him day and night. "*I tell you,*" Jesus said, "*God will quickly grant justice to those crying out*".

Now when he said this, the listeners were certainly reminded of the prophesy for the end-times. "*The days are surely coming, says the Lord.*" From Jer 31:31 was the prophesy that

¹ Brittany E. Wilson, "*Commentary on Luke 18:1-8*" http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4201 (accessed 10/18/19).

² Stephen Wright. "*Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World.*" In: J Green, T Long, L Powery, C Rigby, eds. Connections. Yr C, Vol 3 (Louisville: WJKP; 2019),406.

likely came to mind first. They certainly found comfort in the fact that we're promised that even amid this broken world we can rest, for evil WILL NOT have the last word, God's kingdom WILL be established on earth, all things WILL be made new, every tear WILL be washed away, death WILL be no more...and **JUSTICE WILL FLOW DOWN LIKE THE WATERS.**

Yes, Jesus reminded them that God will deliver justice, but then Jesus seemed to anticipate their (and by extension our) questions, doubts and weakness, for Jesus wondered aloud, "...and yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Effectively, he said, "stop speculating about when I will return to make all right again, and start praying now!"³ He was reminding us all that his return to fully bring justice to earth is on the divine timetable, and that we followers need, like the widow, to wait, but not quietly. We need not accept our fates or the fates of others in an oppression-ridden world. We need spend our time resisting injustice, as did Jesus, himself, with resolve and constancy. We need live as God's voices, crying out God's will and way in this world. Prayer, is one way, a very active way, to do this. (*repeat*)

I really like Kimberly Bracken Long's words...*She says, that by praying faithfully, even prayers which seem to be going unanswered, we are participating in the coming reign of God. By praying continually, and not giving up hope, we live in the surety that God has not abandoned this world. Living in hope, we work, in whatever ways we can, for the justice and peace that is coming.*"⁴ Our life of prayer then, friends, will look like Jesus' prayer life: always asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting, trusting fully, always praising and offering thanks, sometimes rejoicing, sometimes fainting, sometimes arguing even becoming angry, but always praying. What our prayer life does not look like is "DRAWING ANSWERS FROM A HAT, or as my pastor used to say, "putting quarters in a coke machine." "*In a large gathering of persons concerned about certain unfair and oppressive conditions in our society, an elderly black minister read this parable and then gave a one-sentence interpretation: "until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is."*"⁵

³ Kimberly Bracken Long. "Pastoral Perspective on Luke 18:1-8" In: David Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Feasting on the Word. Yr C, Vol 4 (Louisville: WJKP; 2010),190.

⁴ Kimberly Bracken Long.

⁵ Fred Craddock. *Interpretation: Luke* (Louisville: JKP;1990),210

So, we need pray then, friends, constantly, lifting up all that hurts, and worries and threatens us, and others, every fear and doubt, every lament and plea, every wrong, to the One who hears and answers. The answers may not come now, or even soon. They may not come as we think they should, but we will receive what we most need, just as the early church received what they most needed: a sense of God's loving presence and attentiveness, and the strength and resilience and fortitude it needed to survive. The promise is that in the asking, the honest expression of our deepest desires and needs and longings and hopes, God transforms our desires and somehow gives us what we need.

Rev. Will Willimon, Bishop in the Methodist church, tells of a woman in one of his congregations who prayed for 20 years for God to give her a sense of peace in her interactions with others. She had been diagnosed as suffering from an anxiety disorder. She had tried medication, but the drugs didn't seem to help much. So she kept praying, "Lord, in your time, please deliver me from my affliction. Make me less anxious." There came that point in her life when she was finally delivered of her affliction. Her doctor's opinion was, "you just grew out of it." She was 48 years old and had suffered from anxiety for all of her life. Surely there was more than "you just grew out of it." She believed that her prayers over 20 years at last had been answered. "What if I had stopped praying after just a year or so? What if I had just given up?"⁶

Friends, when we come to the Table each month and pray that we may be "*kept faithful in God's service until Christ comes in final victory*", when we pray every week for "*God's kingdom to come, God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*", when we pray these things we are actively hoping in faith, we are eagerly anticipating the coming reign of God who will bring justice not only for ourselves, but will bring it through us for the whole suffering world. Even now we are seeing him break into it, each and every day. (pretzel) So, let us persevere in prayer. "*The days are surely coming, says the Lord.*" (Jer 31:31)... Amen.

⁶ Will Willimon. "Keep at It" <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9821/october-20-2019-keep-at-it> (accessed 10-18-19).