

October 16, 2022
"Keep the Faith"
Psalm 19 / Luke 18:1-8
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Here we go again. Or more like still.

STILL on his way to Jerusalem, as we found him last week with the healing of the 10 lepers, Jesus is talking faith. And he's doing it by lifting up yet another example of faith his listeners would have been least likely to expect.

This is what Jesus does. All means all.

Last Sunday it was the Samaritan, and ONLY the Samaritan, who returned to Jesus to offer praise and thanksgiving after being healed of his leprosy. The Samaritan, a surprising example as we noted last week, given the long history of bad blood between Jews and Samaritans.

"Get up and go on your way;" Jesus said to him. "Your faith has made you well." YOUR FAITH has made you well.

In between that reading and this morning's, Jesus is asked by the Pharisees, the self-appointed keepers of the law, when the kingdom of God was coming? To which Jesus responds that it is already among them, already among you. Already WITHIN you, in fact.

In other words, through even simple ACTS of faith, faith expressed as gratitude in the case of the Samaritan. Or humility, as is the case with the equally despised tax collector in the reading that follows this one. Or faith expressed as hope, as love.

Through acts of faith, you are already bringing the kingdom to bear right here and right now. All of you, even the despised Samaritans and tax collectors, have a part to play in ushering in the kingdom of love.

All of you, even the widows, Jesus says. Perhaps especially the widows.

The parable we get this morning begins and ends with faith. Verse 1 comes right out and UNDERLINES the point of the parable. HIGHLIGHTS it in bright neon yellow, lest there be any doubt among Jesus' disciples, to whom we're told the parable is directed.

It's about the "need to pray always and not to lose heart." To pray always and not to lose heart. That's what faith is, and the disciples are apparently struggling to hold onto it themselves. They are distressed, discouraged. Following Jesus is turning out to be a lot harder than they thought it would be. Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart.

The parable ends with verse 8: "And yet, when the Son of Man," the Child of Humanity, "comes, will he find faith on earth?" In the end, will faith be found?

Pray always and don't lose heart. Be like the widow, another unexpected, surprising model of faith. The widow, the wounded woman, not despised like the Samaritan and tax collector, but SO neglected that she may as well have been.

Largely ignored, living on the margins of society, even though Mosaic law – and Love itself – insists on particular concern and care for widows, like orphans, as among the most vulnerable members of the community. In a highly patriarchal society, widows no longer had the economic security they may have enjoyed through their husbands.

But be like the widow, Jesus says. Like Tamar and Naomi and Ruth and Anna before her.

We're told that she comes before an unjust judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Imagine! And she comes demanding "justice against (her) opponent."

We don't know who the opponent is. We don't know what the injustice involves. But it doesn't matter. All we need to know is that in a certain city, ANY city really, there was an unjust judge, a POWERFUL man, who refused her appeal again and again and again and again. And in that same city there was a seemingly POWERLESS but relentlessly FAITH-ful woman, a widow, who went back to that same judge again and again and again and again. INSISTING on justice, however unlikely she was to actually get it.

Until she did. Until she got what she believed she deserved, what she knew in her heart she deserved. Justice was eventually granted, not because the judge had a sudden change of heart, but only, ONLY because the widow kept pestering him. Wearing him down with her belief. Her truth. Her faith.

I used to watch *The Simpsons*. Still going in its 34th season, the longest-running American primetime TV series in history.

For some reason I have always remembered a scene where Lisa and Bart Simpson, the two children of Marge and Homer for those who aren't familiar, ask Homer if they can go to Kamp Krusty – hailed as the “krustiest” place on earth. Kamp Krusty turns out to be hell on earth, but they don't know that yet.

In my memory at least, the scene plays out something like this:

“Dad, can we go to Kamp Krusty?”

“No!” (repeat about 10 times, rapid fire)

And then one last time, with Homer clearly disheveled and exhausted: “Dad, can we go to Kamp Krusty?”

“Will you leave me alone if I say yes?”

“Yes!”

“OK then, yes.”

“Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone,” the unjust judge says to himself, with not one ounce of shame, “yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

And not only that, there's actually a bit of slapstick humor in the parable – humor that gets lost in translation. Verse 5, translated here as “so that she may not WEAR ME OUT by continually coming” uses the Greek word, *hypopiazō*. The word is found only twice in Greek Scriptures – the other time in 1 Corinthians, chapter 9, using an athletic metaphor to describe the need for self-discipline: “So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though

beating the air, but I PUNISH my body”, *hypopiazo*, or I DISCIPLINE my body, “... so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.”

Hypopiazo is a boxing term, literally meaning to “to strike under the eye.” Like, you know, giving someone a black eye! Leaving your mark.

So hear the unjust judge saying instead, “... yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not finally come and give me a black eye.” So that she may not finally come and slap me in the face!

This widow, of all people, is A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH! She is a force for justice.

Be like her, Jesus says to his disciples – all men, remember, among the 12. Be like that. Have faith like that. And remember, as one commentator puts it, that this “portrait of faith, please note, is also a portrait of prayer.”

Pray always and do not lose heart – that’s the point of the parable. This is a powerful example of faith, of prayer, as persistence, as dogged determination. “Not as a meekly, bow-your-head sort of thing,” as the same commentator further suggests, “but rather as firmly planting your feet and taking a stand.” Taking a stand.

It’s worth noting here that a typical posture of prayer in Jesus’ time was not bowing your head and closing your eyes, as we often think of prayer, but rather standing up. Arms out, with palms up. Eyes open and voice clear.

Eyes open and voice clear like the widow’s, believing – with deep and abiding faith – that justice is a paramount expression of divine love; what love looks like in public, as Cornel West has said. Believing that unlike the unjust judge, God insists on justice as much as the widow does.

The parable makes explicit the comparison between the unjust judge and God: “And will not God grant justice to (God’s) chosen ones who cry to (God) day and night?”

How much more will God hear your cries for justice! This is another teaching tool Jesus uses A LOT.

When encouraging prayer earlier in Luke's gospel, as we came across earlier this summer, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, HOW MUCH MORE will (God) give the Holy Spirit to those who ask ...?"

Or in affirming God's care for humanity, Jesus exclaims, "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, HOW MUCH MORE will (God) clothe you – you of little faith?"

How much more will God hear your cries for justice! How much more, and more quickly, will God grant justice.

Now we have to be careful here, of course, not to misunderstand Jesus as saying that God is Santa Claus, granting whatever justice God's beloved ask for, whenever they ask for it. Otherwise, we might misunderstand that where there is no justice, where we do not see or experience justice, God is not listening. God is not responding. God does not care. Or that we, or those who are facing injustice, are not among God's beloved – injustice, poverty somehow a sign of God's disfavor.

To be sure, that ridiculous and dangerous theology was around in Jesus' day, and it's alive and well in the Church today.

But God does care. Injustice is on us, not God. Injustice is what we do to each other and to the earth itself.

God's promised kingdom of love and justice, God's deepest desire for us and for creation, may not be fully realized yet, but keep the faith, Jesus says. Pray always and take heart that our God is a god of justice. Our God stands firmly on the side of justice. On the side of the widow, the orphan, the poor, the homeless, the foreigner, the outcast, the outsider. All means all! Injustice for one is injustice for all.

Faith, here, is tied to that fundamental belief. Have faith in that. Know it, trust it in your heart like you know and trust the sun will rise in the east and set in the west, as the Psalmist reminds us in our other reading this morning.

“Each dawn tells of God's beauty; each night shines with God's grace.” The sun “starts at one end of the heavens and circles to the other end, and nothing can hide from (its) heat.”

God's beauty, God's grace, God's love and God's unending desire for JUSTICE, is as reliable as the sun.

“God's compassion is fathomless, refreshing the soul. God's justice is absolute, lighting up the eyes. God's love is radiant rejoicing the heart, more precious than the finest gold, sweeter than honey from the comb.”

Believe that with your whole being – your mind, your heart, your soul, your body. Keep the faith. Hang in there when and where justice feels far off. Is far off. Pray always and do not lose heart. Keep your heart in it because that's where God is. That's where your life-blood is. That's where the kingdom takes root among you, within you.

Again, the parable clearly presents the just God in stark contrast to the unjust judge, but we also find God in the widow. The one who will not give up in her tireless, tenacious, righteous pursuit of justice.

And if God won't, we can't. Because justice, on earth as it is in heaven, depends on it. The kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven, depends on that pursuit. OUR individual and collective pursuit.

Before there can be justice, before there can be love, before there can be hope, there must be faith. Faith, even faith like a little mustard seed, sets the stage for what is possible in a world where we are socially conditioned to believe that the way things are is the way they will always be.

As my dad always used to say, and as I have shared many times at Calvary, “If you don't BELIEVE you can, you will always be right.”

In the end, Jesus asks, will such faith on earth be found? Faith like the widow's? Faith that demands justice. Faith that moves mountains?

The answer to that question, of course, depends on us. Each of us. All of us. So keep the faith, friends.

May it be so.