

Unwearied in Prayer
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle
October 16, 2016

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. (Luke 18:1-8)

The lectionary has blessed us again with a cornucopia of Scripture's most memorable verses. The prophet Jeremiah describes God's new covenant with these soaring words: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Then there is that incredible advice given to Timothy from the 2nd letter that Kerstin just read so beautifully: "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." Hard to believe that was written 2,000 years ago. Our cornucopia includes the 121st Psalm which is one of those short gems worth memorizing. Two snippets: "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul." Oh my. And then the Parable of the Unjust Judge which William Barclay calls simply Unwearied in Prayer. "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?"

It seems as though the lectionary knew that this week we would need the strong assurance of God's guiding, protective presence in our lives. I don't know about you but every place I've been this week there has been rather animated discussion about the election that is now less than a month away. Emotions are running so high there is concern that regardless of who wins the vote, America will lose, at least in the short term. The detachment from the truth has become so persistent that it takes on the appearance of reality for the angry millions who have fallen behind in a rapidly changing world. So I am struck, not for the first time, by the prescience of the lectionary which speaks so directly to what is going on in our lives this very day.

Let us pray. Ever present God open our hearts and minds that we might hear your word as you intended and be changed by it. Amen

This parable will not let us rest smugly believing that we are the righteous widow because we know that more often than we care to acknowledge we are also the judge.

It has been several weeks since Luke recorded any real movement by Jesus and his disciples. We are getting very close to Jerusalem and Passion Week in Luke's narrative, even as we anticipate Advent – it's just six weeks away. So there isn't a great deal of context for the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge. Luke simply tells us the parable is about our need to pray always and not to lose heart. Which is not to say it is a simple message. Hearing this passage the first time can be a bit confusing about who's who. Is Jesus telling us that if we want our prayers answered we must be like the widow who just keeps coming to him until our prayers are answered? If we are persistent enough God will finally take pity and grant our wish? We are skeptical of that interpretation but Jesus always has the capacity to surprise.

Uncertain as we read along, we slow down, re-examine a verse or two, so that by the time we get to the end it's fairly apparent that the judge is *not* God. Indeed, the judge is everything God is not. Jesus confirms this by saying "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Jesus assures us God will quickly grant justice to them. So we understand that the judge and God are polar opposites. Does that then mean we understand ourselves to be the widow seeking justice? We'll come back to that in a minute but in the meantime

think about that on a personal basis; are you, am I, constantly working to bring justice to the world?

Luke tells us the parable is about the need to pray always and not lose heart; to be unwearied in prayer. I won't dwell on this but in our current environment I was struck by Jesus' description of the judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people". It is a characterization we don't hear often but it seems useful these days given all that is going on. So why did the widow keep going back to the judge seeking justice against her opponent. It mustn't have been critical to the story since neither Luke nor Jesus comment but William Barclay makes an interesting observation based on the outward appearance of the hearing. The widow's grievance must have been a civil complaint, outside the scope of Jewish law. Through tradition and experience it was always preferable to go before the elders where the possibility of receiving justice was much higher. Had it been a Jewish court there would have been three judges; one appointed by the plaintiff, a second by the defendant, and the third independently appointed. It seems that paid magistrates were just a cut above tax collectors in Judah; they were all about the money. We gather from the structure of this parable that the widow has neither money nor influence and so her chances of being granted justice are slim. But what the widow lacks in material things, she more than makes up for with pluck, persistence and prayer although Jesus never mentions prayer specifically.

The next thing we learn is that the judge has a low tolerance for nagging widows. The judge even acknowledges he has no fear of God and no respect for others but because the widow is a thorn in his side he decides to grant her petition simply to make her disappear. There is no discussion about the merits of the case or how the widow responded to the eventual outcome. It seems the judge serves only to provide counterpoint to the nature of God who Christ assures us will "quickly grant justice" to his chosen ones. As reassuring as those words are, I am confident in saying that nearly all of us have had a different experience at least once.

We are left to wonder why might that be. Are we not among God's chosen ones? Have we not been sufficiently persistent in our prayer? Have our prayers been inappropriate seeking that which might not be in our long-term interest or perhaps contrary to the common good? In times of disappointment if not despair most of us have wondered if only to ourselves, "does God even hear my solitary prayer?"

When we get to the end of our reading Jesus asks a devastating question that forces at least a moment of self-reflection: "when the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth?" As we reread the passage we are compelled to ask ourselves if we are more like the judge than the widow? Do we lack discipline in our prayer life? We may prefer to think of ourselves as prayerful and persistent but in our day-to-day activities do we ignore or dismiss those we find annoying? Do we not sometimes show a lack of courtesy to those we know can't hurt us just because we find them annoying or as Jesus puts it, because they bother us? Nearly every one of us has done it; I know I have. But this parable calls our attention not just to individuals but also those issues in society that are unjust. Whether it's racial discrimination, Islamophobia, rapacious payday loans, inappropriate workplace behavior or gender discrimination, we are called to speak out; we are called to keep coming back and saying grant me justice. This parable will not let us rest smugly believing that we are the righteous widow because we know that more often than we care to acknowledge we are also the judge.

Another way to mischaracterize the duality of this story is that we must be patient while God responds to our prayers. While I believe that is a true statement we need to be vigilant about where and how liberally we apply that patience. Perhaps this part of the sermon is strictly for my benefit but Mychal Denzel Smith leaves no uncertainty in a piece he wrote in *The Nation* magazine a few years ago: "You don't get to define progress in a struggle that is not your own. It's really that simple." Martin Luther King Jr. wrote "For years now I've heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'wait' has almost always meant 'never'." As a result of a tragically long and

growing list of fatal encounters between law enforcement and unarmed persons suspected of a misdemeanor, society often cautions patience. Our political discourse is already overcharged and I certainly don't want to add to it. But if we look at the history of civil rights in this nation – even since the 1960s when so much legislation was enacted – can we say with conviction that patience has been rewarded? Those who advocated for patience were generally white persons who had never experienced the racism and oppression that nearly all persons of color have experienced. Patience is a virtue until it becomes an excuse.

We conclude that Jesus is saying we are both widow and judge. What are we to do; how do we become more like the widow? Again, Luke tells us at the outset that we need to pray always and not lose heart. We must pray always for the wisdom to know when patience is no longer warranted. We must pray always for energy and strengthened faith so that we will not lose heart. We have considered prayer on many occasions in the past; it is a topic that is endlessly important. In our prayer lives we have all experienced the disappointment of what seems to be unanswered prayer. Since we cannot know the reasons why, our only recourse is persistence. While our hope in the efficacy of prayer may wobble at times, surely the answer is not to cease praying professing there is little point. Timothy is advised to be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. And more than that he must convince, rebuke, and encourage, with utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, and will turn away from listening to the truth.

Pray always and do not lose heart, not because you think you will wear God down. We pray because of the effect it has on us; persistent, ardent prayer changes us. Last week we heard from Debie Thomas, who self identifies as a writer in California. Writing in *Christian Century* magazine Ms. Thomas says "I know that when I persist in prayer – really persist, with a full heart, over a long period of time – something happens to me. My sense of who I am, to whom I belong, what really matters in this life,

and why – these things mature and solidify. My heart grows stronger. It becomes less fragile and flighty. Once in a while, it even soars. And sometimes – here's the surprise – these good things happen even when I don't receive the answer I'm praying for."

The world has seldom seemed more conflicted or the truth so obscured. It's time to double down on prayer. It's time to double down on God's central teaching: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Pray always and do not lose heart.

Amen