

Sermon October 20, 2013 "Finding Faith" Luke 18:1-8 Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Children's time: cross necklaces so tangled that I could not free one; life gets so tangled that it can be hard to see how to be Christian...

As soon as a widow got home from her husband's funeral, the phone rang. A man with a cultured voice expressed his sympathy, and then proceeded to inform the newly widowed woman that her husband owed him money. He didn't want to intrude, but he knew that she would want to take care of her husband's obligation, so could he please meet with her that afternoon? Frazzled, the woman did not question the man's claims, and ended up being rooked out of good portion of the money she and her husband had saved. Where is justice?

A single father who had been receiving welfare for several months finally got a job for \$11.00/hour at a spring factory. No benefits, because they would keep him under 35 hours a week... He didn't worry about benefits, because his kids were covered by the State. But when he started getting paychecks, the State told him that he would lose his health benefits, and his food stamps would also be cut. Then he found out that he no longer qualified for a subsidized day care program since he now had a job..... Where is justice?

A small percentage of the people of this world consume the majority of the world's resources. Put a different way: A lot of folks in the USA agonized over which restaurant to go to this week and worried about how much weight we have gained, while thousands of children throughout the world die of hunger every day. Is this justice?

We pray for the world, for hungry children, for peoples at war, for understanding and sensitivity to be given to those with power, but suffering continues and evil seems victorious in lots of areas. Each time we read the newspaper or turn on the television, we see more pain, and more wrong with this world. Do our prayers mean nothing? Is there no justice in life?

The injustice of the world certainly disturbed the prophet Habakkuk. He cried out to God: "How long are you going to let this injustice continue, God? Yes, your people sinned and turned away from you, but why should you choose those who are far more evil than we to punish us? Can it be that you are on the side of injustice?... How long, O Lord, must we suffer?" (Habakkuk 1:2-3)

God's reply: Through faithfulness the righteous will find full abundant life in due time. But one must be patient and wait on God to fulfill the promise. This answer reverberates throughout the Bible: trust in the Lord. "Those who wait for the Lord..shall mount up with wings like eagles."
(Is. 40:31 - our bulletin cover today)

The Gospel lesson for today tells us a lot about how we are to proceed, but we must consider it carefully. This is a parable that is easily misunderstood. At first glance it may seem to teach that if we will be constant in prayer and keep banging on heaven's door, we can get almost anything we want. Viewed this way, God would seem to be a heavenly tyrant who slowly and grudgingly gives in after we have battered God into submission. Maybe not so different from some of our members of Congress this past week!

Such an interpretation is not consistent with Jesus' teachings. The better approach seems to be to notice first of all that in Jesus' story the judge is quickly identified as a man who does not respect God or other people. The important person in this story is the widow. Jesus was calling to those who would follow him to be persistent in prayer and in acting out their faith, even in the face of seeming indifference and continuing injustice. And he closed with the "zinger": "But will the Son of Man find faith on earth when he comes?" This parable is not a picture of how God acts, but a directive as to how Christians must act as we wait for God's completion of history.

In Jesus' day, there was nobody less powerful than a widow. The widow could not even take possession of her deceased husband's property...she had no power on her own. The widow in Jesus' story was trying to do the impossible: to get justice from one of the most powerful folks in her day, a judge...and in this case, a judge who did not respect God and did not care about people. Be as persistent in your praying as that poor widow was, even when things seem about as hopeless as her situation was. True faith perseveres even when the "right" answer doesn't seem to come and the situation seems impossible.

God is nothing like that haughty judge in Jesus' story. A read through the Bible will show us that God has always been concerned about justice for those who are powerless. In Exodus 22:22-24, God said, "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn...and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans." And in Deuteronomy 27:19: "Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice." So God wants justice. It's a challenge, though, because God wants justice to be carried out by God's people – US!

Remember that Luke introduced today's Gospel story by saying that this story is about how we should pray! And persist. Even when we feel as powerless against all the injustices of the world as that widow did. Even when it seems that God isn't listening to or caring about us.

Years ago a young black man asked his minister why his people had to suffer so much poverty, hardship, and oppression. 'Why doesn't God do something?' he wailed. 'He has,' said that wise pastor. 'He has created you.' And so Desmond Tutu, who became the archbishop of South Africa, became the answer to his own question. "Why doesn't God do something?" While we are waiting for God to bring in a perfect and just society, you and I are being called to be part of God's answer to the injustice in our world. That's what it means to take up a cross and follow Jesus. It's not a comfortable easy-chair Christianity. It may not be popular. But it is Christ's way. – King Duncan, *Collected Sermons*, www.Sermons.com (Edited substantially by FTE)

Our faith is not really faith if it remains intact only when our God performs as a heavenly vending machine and gives us what we think we require. If we have to see results in order to pray, we have placed our "faith" in ourselves and our own perceptions rather than in Almighty God.

In the Twenty-third Psalm, the first four words of the third verse proclaim of God: "...He restoreth my soul." The psalmist did not say: "God restores my fortune," or "God restores my body." The Psalmist didn't say, "God gets rid of all my troubles, God eradicates all my enemies." The Psalmist said that, even in the face of my enemies, God feeds me. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, God is with me.

A man told his pastor that he had decided never to pray for anything any more. He said, "I have been praying for certain things to happen in my life, and nothing has changed. Everything is as bad as ever. Prayer doesn't seem to make any difference at all, except to make me more discouraged than ever about God. My daughter is still ill. My job is as rotten as ever. I can't get along any better with my wife. Prayer doesn't work for me."

We may find ourselves approaching God with a wish-list or a demand list, as the man who was so discouraged about prayer did. "I need this, God. Fix that. Make this turn out all right. This is what I need, God." When we approach prayer as a time to give orders to God, to simply hand over to God our "wish- or demand-lists," we may not be letting ourselves realize that GOD may want to tell US something. God may have a job for US to do.

In his book, *Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God*, Tony Campolo talks about prayer. I quote him: "I do it every morning, but I don't have it figured out yet. The more I'm blessed by it, the less I understand just what it is. The more God fails to give me what I desperately beg for, the more assurance I have that God understands me, suffers with me, and will carry me through. Of course, I'm talking about my prayer life.

"It never made sense to me to believe that I had to tell God what God already knew. For instance, I cannot imagine when I pray, 'Dear God, sister Mary is sick and in the hospital,' that God is up there in heaven saying, 'Whoa! I did not know that! Which hospital?' The God of the Bible 'knows what we need before we even ask' (Matt. 6:8). Nevertheless, I regularly spend time telling God what God already knows. I do it not only because the Bible tells me to do it (Phil. 4:6), but because I am driven to it, especially in times of desperation. I do it because prayer stabilizes me in times of trouble, comforts me when I get hurt, encourages me when I am about to go a-wobbling, and keeps me alive when I think I'm going to die. When my cynical friends chide me and say, 'You use prayer as a crutch, Campolo, because you don't feel strong enough to face up to what your life is about,' I can only answer, 'Of course!' Those who believe that they are self-sufficient are, on the one hand, people who think they don't need prayer, and on the other hand, people who are most deluded. To these cynics I can only say, 'Your time will come. And when it does, the good news is that God will be there waiting and willing to carry you through the valley of the shadow of death.'" (p. 53-54)

Writer Fred Beuchner spoke about prayer when there seem to be no results: "What about when someone is not healed? When prayer seems to go unanswered? Who knows? Just keep praying, Jesus says. Remember the sleepy friend, the crooked judge. Even if the one for whom you pray dies, keep on beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, God will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for." (*Wishful Thinking*, pp. 70-71, edited/alterd by FTE)

The late Dr. Peter Gomes, who was pastor at The Memorial Church at Harvard University, preached to a graduating class at Harvard, using today's gospel lesson :

"The unrighteous judge gave in to the widow's pleas not because he was just or gracious, but because she wore him down. He deserves little moral credit.... Jesus uses the judge to vindicate the widow's hopeless hope... This, in case you haven't recognized it, is a commercial for God. Put your confidence in something that works. It is God who will keep you when all else has failed

you; and it is to God to whom you will turn when you have exhausted all the alternatives. It is God on whom you will call when you get that fateful diagnosis; it is God on whom you will call when the bottom drops out; and it is God on whom you will call when you pass through those seasons of doubt and despair, when life itself seems not worth the living and you cannot remember the last victory. It is God on whom you will call with your very last breath. So do not give up, do not lose heart... ” (*More Sunday at Harvard*, Cambridge, Massachusetts)

There is much in life that renders us powerless and makes us wonder who is really in charge. It is precisely at these points in our lives where we see no way out, no path to power, that we actually have the *most* power: we can call upon God in faith, with the belief that what we see or experience is NOT the whole picture, because God - our Creator and Redeemer, who has promised unending love for us - is really in charge and, finally, will bring about justice for God’s children.

When we DON’T see an answer or a way, we still have something: the power to give God the gift of our faith and trust. And that’s what Jesus Christ has asked us to do. When the Son of Man comes, will he find in us faith? Trust in the Lord. “Those who wait for the Lord..shall mount up with wings like eagles.” (Isaiah 40:31) Amen.