**What Do Disciples ~~Believe~~ Do?**

**“Disciples Seek Justice”**

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18: 1-8

Oct. 16, 2016

**Prayer for Illumination**

God of abundant hope,

We come in wonder… and we come in gratitude for the Word you have given us in Jesus Christ, and the word you have revealed through your Scripture.

As we turn to its pages, we ask that you would use your word to bring us closer to you, opening us, comforting us, challenging us, even confronting us.

That hearing your word, we may respond in hope, faith, and conviction.

Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

**Luke 18: 1-8**

Then Jesus told them a parable

about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

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He said,

“In a certain city

there was a judge who neither feared God,

nor had respect for people.

In that city there was a widow

who kept coming to him and saying,

‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’

For a while he refused;

but later he said to himself,

‘Though I have no fear of God

and no respect for anyone,

yet because this widow keeps bothering me,

I will grant her justice,

so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’”

And the Lord said,

“Listen to what the unjust says.

And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones

who cry to him day and night?

Will he delay long in helping them?

I tell you,

he will quickly grant justice to them.

And yet, when the Son of Man comes,

will he find faith on earth?”

“Disciples Seek Justice”

Amen. It’s such a blessing to hear and see Scripture come alive. We thank you, Embodying Scripture small group, for your offering this morning… and that dramatic presentation of such a rich parable.

But I wonder, Towson Presbyterian… if you have the same question I do each time I come to this parable.

What the heck is it *really* about?

Now… I realize as the preacher this morning I probably shouldn’t open my sermon with such a question… but it bothers me.

Jesus seems to be clear from the outset that this that this parable is about disciples’ need to pray always and not to lose heart. He says so explicitly.

But as we’ve just experienced… not once is the word prayer uttered in this parable… and not once do either of its characters lift a prayer to God.

Rather… what we find is a parable filled with the actions of a powerful jerk of a judge, and a penniless, powerless widow.

Now… widows in that ancient society were desperately vulnerable people forced to live on the margins of society. They were easy to ignore. But if that wasn’t bad enough… it seems something remarkably unjust happened to this widow. We don’t know what it was… just that she desperately wanted—even needed—justice against the one who wronged her.

And the one person who could help her obtain justice was this powerful jerk of a judge. Jesus made clear, this guy had no fear of God and no respect for anyone. So he had no problem ignoring the widow’s persistent pleas for justice.

But she just wouldn’t stop. She kept on… kept on… kept on *persisting* in her pleas for justice… relentlessly hounding the judge day after day until he realized this widow was going to tarnish his reputation. So finally… as means of self-preservation… the judge decided to grant the woman justice.

And with that, the parable that’s supposedly about prayer comes to an end… without mentioning prayer… and without anyone praying.

What does get mentioned… what seems to be the focus of the parable… isn’t prayer… but *justice*, right?  The women needs justice. She asks the judge for justice. He refuses to give her justice at first, but because she persists… he relents and the widow finally finds justice.

So again, I think it’s fair to ask… what is this parable about? Is it really about prayer… Or is it about the pursuit of justice?

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But then again… even the term Luke uses as “justice” isn’t terribly clear or easy to define, is it? Not once does Luke explain exactly what he means by justice. Is it:

1. “fairness; correct treatment; equitable distribution under the law”[[1]](#footnote-1) as says one definition.
2. Or is it “conformity to truth, fact, or reason”[[2]](#footnote-2) as says another.

Which are all perfectly acceptable definitions… sure. But they’re also lacking here because they only speak to justice in relation to secular law and worldly customs. And if we know anything about the Jewish tradition from which Jesus came and to which Jesus was speaking, it’s that there is a higher, holier law to which the people of God are called.

In this regard, I happened upon one source that defines justice as "a concern for justice, peace, and genuine respect for people.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Which… as far as I can tell… comes really close to what Luke is getting at here.

For while Luke never defines exactly what justice means to him… he does give us an awfully big clue in today’s parable.

Did you happen to catch it? He repeated himself. And when a biblical author repeats himself, it’s code for saying, “Hey, pay attention here. You just read these words… but they’re so important I’m going to repeat them for you.”

And if you noticed in the very beginning of the parable, Jesus said, "There was a judge who neither feared God, nor respected people.”

Then later, when this unjust judge relented to the woman’s persistence, he thought to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice.”

It’s Luke’s way of making clear… justice has to do with fearing or respecting God, and respecting others.

Which, gospels readers may recognize is, in a very real way, a reflection of the great commandment Jesus gives earlier in the gospel, to love God… and to love others.

So when we put these two pieces of Luke’s gospel together, we can begin to see the picture Luke is trying to paint for us. **“If you love God, you will love others. And if you have respect for God, then you will have respect for others. And justice… will be evident.”**

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Which seems easy enough, right? I mean… all of us here today can testify to loving God and loving others, as well as respecting God and respecting others.

And yet… it’s also not hyperbole to say injustice still looms all around us.

* Injustice amid systems bent towards the wealthy at the expense of the poor.
* Injustice amid systems and assumptions bent towards the majority at the expense of so many minorities.

It’s not hard to see. This world is unfair. It lacks both equality and equity. And it *certainly* lacks respect for the dignity to be found in each person.

I mean… just listen to almost any political discourse today and the lack of respect people have for those with whom they disagree or don’t know is downright obvious.

**But what isn’t so obvious is how we participate… and sometimes contribute to the injustice around us.**

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For example, I wish there weren’t… but there are clothes in my closet that say they were made in Bangladesh or Vietnam or Cambodia or Indonesia or India—all countries notorious for sweatshop labor. Sadly, that means those clothes I purchased were likely made in factories where workers serve in slave-like conditions for slave-like wages. Like the judge, I can pretend it’s not my problem. I can try and ignore the pains and needs of God’s children in those sweatshops. Or I can ask myself how I’m demonstrating my respect for God and respect for those workers if I give my money to the very institutions that helped create their horrible working environment?

For when we buy clothes made from sweat labor, we, make no mistake, are contributing to the injustice of our world… and its unjust economic system and unethical business practice that do anything but offer respect for God and God’s people.

And that’s just one small example.

What about our desire for comfort vs our carbon footprints? It’s easy to ignore how climate change is already impacting the poorest nations with the least amount of infrastructure to combat its effects. But justice asks something else of us.

And what about the racial and economic strife that surrounds us right now and the unwitting ways we participate in it rather than seeking to understand it and grow from it? What is justice asking of us here? What does love and respect for God require of us in the ways of loving and respecting our neighbors… whether we know them or not… whether we agree with them or not?

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The truth is… love and respect for those we don’t know and those we don’t agree with don’t come naturally to us. This world teaches us… day in and day out… to put ourselves first. To put our families first… and after that to put our communities or nation or religion first.

Which is why, I believe, Luke shapes Jesus’ parable the way he does.

Back to our original question… What is this parable about? Is it about prayer… or is it about justice?

I suspect Luke’s answer is simply, “Yes.”

I suspect Luke all-too-intentionally set up this parable about justice through the lens of prayer precisely to get us exploring the relationship between prayer… and justice.

* As if prayer and justice are two sides of the same coin.
* As if you can’t have a meaningful prayer life with God without also having a high regard for justice.
* As if you can’t establish a world of justice without an incredibly persistent prayer life.

For while the world teaches us to put ourselves first… it’s prayer that helps us uncover God’s will for us *and* our world. And not just that. **While prayer is certainly a vehicle for us to communicate with God… the biggest power of prayer lies not in our ability to get God to do the things we want, but in God’s ability to lead and equip us to accomplish the things God wants.**

As author Kathleen Norris so beautifully put it, “(In the end)...prayer is not (just) asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you cannot imagine."[[4]](#footnote-4) Let me repeat that. “Prayer is not (just) asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you cannot imagine.

It’s why Jesus says it’s so important for us to persist in our prayers. Not in order to get everything we think we want… but to learn and grow into who God is calling us to be and all God is asking us to do… as God invites us to be justice makers… here and now.

So, dear friends, if you want a more just world…

If you want to see more of God’s kingdom in the here and now…

One of the most important things you can do… is to pray… and pray persistently. Pray not just for what you want… but pray, dear friends, for what God longs to see. Pray with your heart and minds… as well as your hands and feet and voices, too.

Far from empty platitudes or do-nothing mental exercises… the kind of prayer we’re talking about may begin with bowed heads and folded hands… but it sure as heck doesn’t end that way.

For it is in prayer that we learn… while things aren’t as they should be, God can and does use us to help create what should be… as we persist in God’s pursuits for justice. Amen.

1. Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible, 757. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Merriam-Webster online dictionary, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/justice [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This, believe it or not, is Google’s definition for justice. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, p. 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)