

C Lectionary 29 10.16.22

Genesis 32:33-31; Luke 18:1-8

Focus Statement: God is faithful and gives us everything we need.

“Then Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.” Well, that’s a nice, simple introduction. It’s not often that Jesus starts a parable off with telling his listeners exactly what they are supposed to take from it. Pray always and not lose heart, and when the Son of Man comes, He will find faith on earth.

Which is a nice message, the widow badgered the unjust judge, and he granted her justice against her opponents. This parable is easy to hear as a description of God as a vending machine: prayers go in, blessings come out. Ask enough times, with the right persistence, and the right faith, and God will answer your requests. Except it doesn’t work. Badgering God is rarely, if ever, that effective. I’ve seen a lot of people badger God, done a fair amount of badgering myself, and not seen a lot of justice against opponents. This is true in the personal realm, even more in the political. To the point where the phrase “thoughts and prayers” has almost become shorthand for “we don’t plan on doing anything to solve this problem.”

The problem, or actually two problems, we run into in this parable is we try to put ourselves in the role of a first century widow and God in the role of unjust judge. We cannot compare ourselves to a first century widow, and God is in the story, though not in the way we assume.

It is almost impossible in our modern context to get across just how powerless a position a first century widow would hold. In the first century's patriarchal power structure, a woman's entire not just identity but even existence was based on the man to which she was associated. First a father and then a husband. If a woman's husband died and there was not another man under who's societal place she could land, she was basically a non-person. That she was badgering a judge at all was remarkable, because she didn't have standing to even seek justice on her own. In the cultural view of women at the time, this would be as if Travis and I died, and Cat went to the court seeking justice against his new owners who weren't taking care of him. A first century widow and my housecat would have similar social standings.

And where this story breaks down from the simple "just keep praying to God and God will answer your prayers" interpretation is that the widow didn't pray to God for justice, she badgered the judge. Again and again, until justice was received. The amount of bravery and courage and persistence that move would have required of her cannot be understated. This is the story of a woman claiming her agency, a woman who, despite all of society's expectations on her place, insisted on seeing herself as a full member of the community and demanding the rights and privileges that entailed. Where I think God fits into this story is in giving the widow the confidence that she too was made in the *imago dea*, in the image of God, to fight for a world that granted her justice. This woman knew her value, knew her worth, and demanded that worth until the world responded in kind.

Dear people of God, THAT is the power of prayer. A power that shows us our value, that gives us a glimpse of the kingdom of God, so that we can demand that value, that kingdom in the world. God is not a better version of the unjust judge, granting our wishes if only we are persistent enough in asking, God is the one who shows for us our worth, so that we might demand that worth in the world. God is the vision of justice which we are empowered to strive for because in God we have seen its possibility. Through God we know what such a world could look like.

Prayer, dear people of God, changes not God's actions towards us but changes our actions towards the world. Prayer, and the confidence that comes through prayer, reminds us that we are people of God, created in the image of God, and sent out by God to bring about the kingdom for all. Prayer gives us the courage, the confidence, and the persistence to act, to keep going against all the forces who would try to claim we are powerless. To stand strong in the face of impossible odds and demand justice, for God has shown us a vision of our worth, of everyone's worth, and of God's glory. That is what prayer does.

This is not to say that this is easy, or that we will not be marked by the struggle. Our first reading for this morning tells a very different story of persistence, and the effects it can produce. The first reading is a different story because Jacob is a different character. Unlike the widow, Jacob was not powerless and was certainly someone who knew his power. Since we're jumping in the middle, let's take a moment to get a quick refresher on how we got to Jacob wrestling an angel at the ford of the Jabbok.

Jacob was the younger twin of Abraham's son Isaac. As the younger son, Jacob's inheritance should have been limited. But through a series of tricks and maneuvers, Jacob managed to get from his brother both his birthright and his father's blessing. Having taken both these things, he fled his older brother and ran away to his relative Laban for protection. Reaching safety, he quickly fell in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel. He and Laban struck a deal that if Jacob worked for Laban for seven years, he could have Rachel's hand in marriage. But when the day of marriage arrived, Laban tricked Jacob and married him to his older daughter, Leah. Jacob then worked another seven years, at which point he finally married Rachel. In those fourteen years, Jacob engaged in some sleight of hand of his own and managed to make off with all his father-in-law's best sheep and goats. Eventually, Laban caught on to Jacob's trickery, and when we find Jacob today, he was stuck between the results of these actions, fleeing his enraged father-in-law with nowhere to go but back to the brother he had also tricked.

In the dark of the night, on the shore of the Jabbok, with an enraged father-in-law behind him and a jilted brother in front, Jacob fought with an angel of God, wrestling from that angel a blessing. And first let us pause and note how incredible that in and of itself is, that ours is a God who will wrestled with us. That ours is a God who so wants relationship with us that God will engage is a literal wrestling match on a muddy riverbank in the dark of night. Yes Jacob "won", or at least didn't lose, they were still at it when the sun rose, but the real miracle here is that God exposed the vulnerability to engage in the contest in the first place. Jacob "won" but the experience changed him. For the rest of his life, the very way he moved through the world would be marked by his encounter with God.

Dear people of God, that is the power of the prayer. It will change you. You will be marked by God's power and presence and persistence in your life. Through prayer you will find yourself both strengthened to stand up for justice and slowed to look carefully at your own actions. Pray always and do not lose heart, for the same God who wrestled Jacob wrestles you, and the same God whose courage filled the widow fills you. Ours is a God to whom no lack of justice can prevail, and ours are the hands and feet and voices, to call for that justice, with persistence and grace and courage, because we have been transformed by our encounter with this God. Amen.