

19 Pentecost, Luke 18:1-8 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5  
Christ and Grace October 20, 2019  
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A few weeks ago we heard the parable where Jesus talked about faith the size of a mustard seed. The disciples were getting overwhelmed – life was getting out of control. This business of discipleship was not the program they signed up for! They demanded more faith, in the way that a drowning person will scream ‘Throw me a life ring!’ And Jesus responded to the disciples by telling them they had enough faith. It’s not how much you have, but what you do with it, he told them.

Then last week in the account of the ten lepers, only one of whom returned to thank Jesus, we saw that gratitude can be a decision, a choice. We can choose to turn toward God and give thanks and praise. Being thankful can be a way to focus on what is good and lasting in our lives, even when life gets challenging.

All of that sounds easy enough. Until we hear the parable Jesus tells us today. We can title it The Persistent Widow, or The Unjust Judge, but it’s important to note that right at the beginning, Jesus clearly states why he is telling the disciples, and us, this story – it’s about the need to pray always, and not to lose heart.

For many of us this parable is a huge and disheartening challenge when we put it in the context of our own lives. We try to be good spouses, good parents, good kids, and we work with integrity to provide for our families. We attend church and serve in various ministries, give regularly, and pray as well as we can. Even so, sometimes things fall apart. Disaster strikes, we are frustrated with the status quo, disease is diagnosed, a job is lost, a loved one dies. Life seems to spin out of our control, with no glimmer of grace on the horizon.

And when that happens, how do we hang on? How do we keep on praying when things keep getting worse instead of better? How do we find the will to get up and go out each day trusting God to see us through when nothing we do seems to work? How do we keep from having "itching ears," as Paul wrote to Timothy, looking for solutions to our problems; or, if not solutions, then for others to blame for our difficulties? What does it take for us to stay the course in difficult and perilous times? What it takes, I would offer, is persistence in prayer, and a community of faith.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus tells his community of disciples to pray and not lose heart, telling them a story about not giving up in the face of difficult times. It is a story about continuing to pray, even when it feels like and looks like the windows of heaven are shut up tight and God seems to be absent. The story Jesus tells uses a courtroom, a bad judge, and a poor widow to teach us lessons about life and God and about our need to pray without ceasing.

It’s good to remember that parables are not about the characters themselves; they are about God and about us. It’s also good to recall that Luke loves to use hyperbole, or exaggeration, to make a point. And that is what would have made this a very funny story, an impossible tale, for those hearing it as Luke told it then. In society at that time, women were normally restricted to roles of

little or no authority. They could not testify in court, appear alone in public, or talk to strangers. Widows were the most vulnerable of all, having no one to care for them and no voice or agency.

So it was ludicrous to think this woman had any chance at all to overcome the odds. She would never have been allowed to plead her case in court, but more likely would have been standing on the side of the road every day, heckling the judge as he passed by, making him out to be the fool, bested by a little old ornery widow woman! It sounds unlikely and outrageous, but that is how things happen in the kingdom. The weak are made strong, and justice is served if we will we remain persistent in prayer and in faith.

Our community is the group that forgives us even when we can't forgive ourselves, that holds us accountable, and then fights for us when we get knocked down; that loves us when we feel most unloved. Even the outcast lepers formed a community, and my guess is that the widow woman, though she had no family left, belonged to a community made up of other widows who prayed together and encouraged one another to be persistent.

Gathering with our faith community gives our lives meaning even when life overwhelms us. It supports us in these times, praying for us when we cannot, having faith for us when we find our own faith weak, and it's here that we are equipped to share the light of the Gospel in the world.

Persistence in prayer and faith is not simply words and abstract ideas. It can take the form of giving financially, and of spending time serving others. It can look like singing in the choir, serving on altar guild, or reading a lesson in worship. Being persistent can look like feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely, or taking meals to the sick. A faith community is persistent. When any one of us is absent, we are less than whole. Each person's gifts are needed, so that when any one of us is in a place of suffering, we know we will be ministered to, lifted up in prayer, and given all that we need to persevere in faith. We need to pray, and our actions are answers to prayer.

The reason we exist as a church is not only for ourselves and our needs, but also to share the good news of God in Christ with the world, to be the hands of Jesus in our wider community as we seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves; as we strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

In your bulletin you will find a yellow paper. The stewardship committee invites you to share your ideas of ways we might shine our light in our community. We hope you will take a moment to respond and place your hopes and prayers in the offering plates.

Are we willing to heed Paul's words to Timothy and do the work of an evangelist, and carry out our ministry fully? And when the Son of man comes, will he find faith here at Christ and Grace? We can give up or we can be persistent. We can return with the nine lepers to the status quo or, like the one Samaritan leper, we can turn toward new life in Christ. So pray always, and do not lose heart! Amen.