

“Be persistent. Be insistent.”

Rev. Tracy Fairfield – Aldergrove United Church, October 20, 2019

Luke 18: 1 – 8

There's a hymn that goes:

“Answer my prayer, Lord Jesus; teach me to walk in your way.

Answer my prayer, Lord Jesus; answer my prayer today. Give me the peace and joy that only you can bring. Answer my prayer, Lord Jesus; give me a song to sing.”

Persistence. The voice calling out in that hymn is about persistence; insistence – and even impatience. Answer my prayer. Answer my prayer! Answer my prayer – today! Do we practice a faith that is so persistent? So insistent? The woman in today's gospel message from Luke is persistent. She is insistent. She is relentless. She is faithful. God's people are called to persistence in discipleship – persistence in prayer and meditation, proclaiming God's word and seeking justice.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus told his disciples this parable because they were having problems with prayer. Now we may assume that only contemporary and non-religious people would have problems with prayer, but Jesus knew better. We all have problems with prayer. That's why Jesus told them this parable.

We have many questions and issues and problems about prayer. Mainly we wonder if prayer is really heard by God. So many of our prayers seem unanswered: We pray for health, but there is still a spot on the X-ray. We pray for peace, but the troops aren't home and the wars rage on. We pray for our children, but they still get into deep trouble. We have problems with prayer, but when we dig deep down, problem with prayer is that we lose heart. We just lose heart. We lose confidence and trust and hope that our prayers will be heard and answered. We lose heart. And Jesus told them a parable that they might pray always and not lose heart.

The story that Jesus told his disciples was about an absolutely horrible judge. In ancient Israel, the duty of a judge was to maintain harmony in relationships and settle disputes among Israelites. Disputes involving widows and orphans were not uncommon. The law did not allow a widow to inherit her husband's estate, which passed on to the deceased man's sons or brothers. If these relatives did not act with justice and honour toward the widow of their father or brother, a judge was called in as the widow's final and only hope. This judge hated people and he hated God. He didn't go to church and he refused to give to the United Way. He's the kind of corrupt judge who makes a mockery of the title "Your Honour."

Unfortunately, appearing in his courtroom was a poor widow who needed justice but had nothing. She had absolutely nothing. She had no money, she had no husband, she had no standing, she had no power, she had no resources, she had nothing. She was so insignificant, she probably couldn't have gotten justice in a good courtroom with a good judge, but here she was in the courtroom of the worst judge in the land.

Now, did I say that she had nothing? That's not quite accurate. She did have one thing. She had the capacity to be a pest, to annoy. And, when you have only one weapon, you use it. So she annoyed this judge constantly. She shouted aloud for justice in his courtroom: "Give me justice! Give me justice! Give me justice!" She knocked on his chamber doors, left messages on his answering machine. She probably even found him teeing off at the Golf Club shouting, "Give me justice! Give me justice! Give me justice!"

Finally, she wore the old judge down. The judge said to himself, "You know, I don't care about justice. I don't care about this widow, I don't like people, I don't like God and I don't care about anybody. But this woman is about to drive me crazy! I'm going to give her what she wants just to get her off my back." And that's the story that Jesus told us that we might pray

always and not lose heart. Now, what are we supposed to get out of that story that will help us pray always and not lose heart?

Well, some people say that maybe Jesus wants us to keep our eyes focused on the bad judge. He does tell the disciples, “Pay attention to what this unjust judge says.” And if we pay attention to the judge, well, what do we see? What we see is that, even though he was a horrible man, at the end of the day he did give the woman the justice that she demanded and needed. So maybe what Jesus is teaching us is that, even though the headlines in the newspaper often show a world of corruption and evil, this is, you know, God’s world, this is a world ruled and overruled by a loving and just God, and at the end of the day, there is justice after all. Maybe that’s what Jesus wants us to see.

Well, I believe that and I think that’s part of it, but I don’t think that’s the heart of Jesus’ story, because if that’s all Jesus wanted us to see, the moral of this story would be, “Take heart. Things are not as bad as they seem.” But the moral of this story is “Pray always and do not lose heart.”

OK, maybe Jesus wants us to focus our attention on the poor widow. Did you notice how she went after what she needed? It was, after all, her persistence – “Give me justice! Give me justice! Give me justice!” – that managed to wrangle justice from the unjust judge.

There's a delightful story about the day that Mother Teresa went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, a legendary, powerful Washington criminal lawyer. He at one time owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles and he was the lawyer for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, among others. Evan Thomas's biography of Williams tells the story about when Mother Teresa visited Edward Bennett Williams because she was raising money for an AIDS hospice. Williams was in charge of a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help. Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favourite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." Well, they agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no.

Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no." Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." Williams looked at Dietrich; they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa

said, "Let us pray." Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, "All right, all right, get me my chequebook!"

Maybe that's what Jesus wants: pray like that, pray like Mother Teresa, pray like the widow, cry out, bang on the doors of heaven with insistence. Well, that's part of it, to be sure. But that's not all of it. If that were the whole meaning of Jesus' story, then the moral of the story would be "Be feisty. Pray always." But the moral of this story is, "Pray always and don't lose heart."

No, Jesus' story is not only about the bad judge and it's not only about the insistent widow. It's a story about God and about you and me. This story says, if a poor widow with no standing can eventually wrangle justice out of a judge without honour, how much more will you – God's own child, the one God formed in the womb, the God who has loved you from the very beginning – receive from a God who will hear and answer prayer?

So we can look at this parable with us being the persistent widow, appealing and pestering the unjust oppressors in our society. It can be a metaphor that insistent, persistent prayer can and will be answered.

Of course, if that's the point – and it seems to be – then we have a dilemma, if we are honest with God and ourselves. The dilemma is that nearly two millennia later the poor and oppressed are still calling out for

relief and, for the most part, don't seem to be appreciably closer to a world of justice and compassion than they were when Jesus told the parable. If one reads this parable as it has always been read, as a counsel to relentless prayer, there will always seem to be some lack of evidence that such prayer really makes a difference. Frankly then, the claim for persistence isn't very convincing... or at least not always.

Don't get me wrong. I believe persistent prayer is very important, even when such prayers are not answered in the ways we think best. The value of a strong and persistent prayer life has more to do with the process than the results. It is important to be unrelenting in our prayers...not only because of the changes our prayers may elicit in God's mind, but for the changes such prayers can work in our own hearts and minds. As Frederick Buechner said years ago, persistence is a key, "not because you have to beat a path to God's door before [God will] open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of getting to your door."

Buechner's comment set me to thinking that maybe there's more to this parable than we have sometimes seen. What if Jesus offered this parable not only as a call to prayerful persistence but also as a reminder to the church of the importance of securing justice for the poor and the oppressed in their midst? Alan Culpepper says, "To those who have it in

their power to relieve the distress of the widow, the orphan and the stranger but do not [do so], the call to pray day and night is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of their lives."

What if we stand this parable on its head and hear it as a testimony to the persistence of **God**, who wants us to grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry out day and night? Might this parable speak to the resolute, persistent, insistent, determined One who keeps knocking on our door, challenging us to respond, pressing us to accept God's claims, urging us to work for the good of neighbours in need? This passage offers a lot of food for thought.

Whether you're the widow praying persistently, with insistent faith, demanding justice, or whether God is the persistent one knocking on your door relentlessly, badgering you so that you will practice a faith of justice and compassion, the key is to be persistent, be insistent and to not lose heart.