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Luke 18:1-8 Coming to Our Senses: Do You Hear That?
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 18:1-8 New Revised Standard Version

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 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 judge 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?"

Jesus tells what this story is about, the need to pray always and not to lose heart. Seems simple, right? I wonder if there is more to it. In this story there is a judge and a widow. The Bible tells us judges in Israel had a responsibility to protect the rights of the poor, of widows, and orphans and refugees.¹ Since this judge is indifferent to this widow and to those who live on the margins, this judge is a bad judge. He doesn't respect people or God. He doesn't seem to have any compassion. He wasn't moved by the widow's pleading. Each time she said, "Grant me justice." He said, "No." The widow never gave up. She went to court day after day and demanded to be heard. Again and again and again. The widow stood up to the judge who has institutional power. She was determined to not give up even though the judge who was supposed to protect her fails to do so. Each time she came and demanded justice, the judge got a little more annoyed.

Jesus lets us know what the judge was thinking, that the widow was on his last nerve. He decided to give her what she wanted so that she will leave him alone. Just give her what she wants and get her away from me. The widow gets the justice she demanded. Jesus tells us if this bad judge will finally grant justice for the widow, think of how much a good and gracious God will compassionately respond to the cries of the vulnerable, the outcast, and the oppressed. God is everything this bad judge is not. Is the parable saying we have to keep bugging God, day and night, just like the widow bugged the judge? Eventually our prayers will be answered? Do we just have to be persistent like this widow?

Wait a second. Doesn't the Bible also tell us that justice does not roll down like waters? That the wolf does not lie down with the lamb? That nation continues to lift up sword against nation? From the beginning of time, the vulnerable, the outcast, and the oppressed have been praying for God's justice and compassion to transform hearts, and institutions and the structures of our world, and yet here we are. Righteousness is not yet like an ever-flowing stream. We have been praying for God to end violence and wars, to bring about equality for all people, for there needs to be an end to racism, and sexism and homophobia, for our creation to be healed and for climate change to stop, and yet, here we are. There is always another shooting, another bombing, another eviction, another hungry child, another person assaulted, another person without meaningful employment, and another storm.² We don't seem to be closer to a world of justice and compassion than they were when Jesus told this story.

You and I know too many people who have prayed to God for justice and compassion and their prayers were not answered in the way that they hoped. If the only point of this story is to tell me that if I had been more persistent things would have turned out differently, then I have

¹Exodus 22:21-25; 23:6-9; Deuteronomy 24:14, 17-18; Isaiah 1:17

² Rev. Shannon Kershner. <http://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/101616.html>

no use for this story. God doesn't work like that. God isn't a vending machine. God doesn't say, oh, you prayed 24 times, and then gave up. If you had prayed 25 times, then all of your problems would have gone away. Sorry!

What about if we switch this story up. What if we aren't the widow and God isn't the judge? What if God is the widow and we are the judge? That is going to be hard for us to be a bad judge who isn't kind and compassionate, but let's try. We hear the cry for justice, for compassion. We hear God in the voice of the widow saying, "I am coming to you on behalf of the vulnerable, the outcast, the oppressed. I am not going to leave you alone until you listen to me, until you start listening to the cries of people who are hurting, and lost and alone. I am demanding justice on their behalf. I am demanding that you respond with compassion. I am going to keep coming to you, again and again and again, until you notice that people are hungry, and don't have enough food to eat, and are scared to walk down the street."

God is going to wear us down with grace. The bad judge said the widow was wearing him out. The Greek can also be translated as hit me in the eye or get in my face. God is going to get in our face with God's grace. No matter how many times we try to move on with our lives, no matter how many times we try to only take care of our own people, God will keep coming to us and challenging us to let God's compassion and justice be the first thing in our lives. We can hide from God, we can run from God, but God is going to keep after us until we hear the cries of those who are hurting and do something about it.

I want to invite you to close your eyes and think of someone who is hurting today. It might be someone in the news. It might be someone in your family. It might be someone in your school or at your work. It might be someone who you encounter in your day or in your neighborhood. Can you think of someone who needs justice and compassion in their life, at school or at work? Someone who needs justice and compassion in our world? How can you help? How can you be a part of bringing justice and compassion?

I keep thinking about the widow and her persistence. She insisted on justice, that what was wrong be made right. That what was broken, be made whole again. We can't give up, we have to keep speaking up for justice and for what is right. It is exhausting because injustice is relentless and doesn't give up, but we can't give up either.

We have to follow young women like Greta Thunberg who is speaking out about climate change. She seems so young, but Diana Butler Bass reminded me that at the same age as Greta is now, Joan of Arc led an army, Jane Austen wrote her first work, Sojourner Truth escaped slavery, Anne Frank kept her journal, and Malala won the Nobel Prize. There are millions of young women like this who are not as famous but no less courageous.³

This story reminds me that faith equals tenacity. There are so many stories in the Bible of people who wouldn't give up, the hemorrhaging woman, the Syrophenician woman, Tamar. They teach us that faith isn't about saying I believe you are the son of God. Rather faith is about saying only you can help me and nothing is going to get between me and you. There are more images of people in the Bible who teach us that faith is about the refusal to take no for an answer. Faith is not about people who get the words right. Faith is about knowing what God has done in the past and steadfastly believing in God until God does the next big thing.⁴

God doesn't let us go, never ever and God is always asking us to speak up and to act out for compassion and justice. God is not going to leave us alone about it. God is going to keep us up at night because God wants us to always work for what is right. I don't want to be a bad judge

³ <https://twitter.com/dianabutlerbass/status/1174341132710494209?lang=en>

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1191#commenting_wrap

who has a closed heart. I want to open my heart to what God is persistently asking me to do for justice and compassion. God isn't going to stop calling for justice until those cries are answered.

There are a lot of ways for us to speak out against injustice. We pray with our words, we pray with our hearts, and we pray with our hands and feet. Prayer connects us to God and binds us to one another. This is Children's Sabbath when houses of worship are praying for children. We pray with our words, with our hearts, and with our actions to make things better for children and families, to make our world more fair.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, about participating in a civil rights march with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I felt as though my feet were praying." Our hands and feet can pray this week as we send an email or write a letter to an elected official calling for adequate safety nets for children in poverty, for just policies that give every child a fair start. Our hands can pray as we stock an emergency food pantry, or hold the hand of a child we are mentoring, or hammer a nail to repair a low-income family's home. Our hands pray as we write to our members of Congress to support policy improvements that would cut child poverty. Our feet pray as we walk into a meeting with a legislator to urge them to advance proven policies to lift millions of children out of poverty.⁵

May we not lose heart as we pray and work for justice. We pray for the more than one billion children and parents living in poverty in our world. We pray for our nation and our leaders that they may hear the cries of hurt and pain from children and families in America and at our borders. We pray that we will put children first and end child poverty. We have to keep knocking on the door, until our hands are sore and our knuckles bleed. We have to keep demanding that what is broken be made whole, be made right. God's justice and mercy will ultimately prevail. We must be the persistent, unyielding voice God asks us to be. Thanks be to God, Amen.

⁵ <https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-Sabbath-Christian-Worship-Resouces.pdf>