

¹ Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.' ⁴ For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " ⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" ⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Luke 18:1-14

10/19/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

Stewardship II: "Faithful"

Pastor Amy Terhune

"In his book, *A Home Forum Reader*, Glenn Wasson relates a simple experience that had a profound effect on his life. He had been clearing brush in the mountains when he took a lunch break. He sat on a log by a rushing stream, woods all around him, and bit into his sandwich.

"Suddenly a persistent bee began tormenting him, buzzing around his head, as if it intended to sting him. Glenn waved it off, but it quickly returned. This time he swatted it to the ground and stepped on it. He thought his problem was solved, but to his amazement, the bee emerged from the sand to renew its attack.

"Before it had a chance to get airborne again, Glenn ground the insect into the sand. That should do it, he thought. But as he was finishing his lunch, out of the corner of his eye he noticed the bee burrowing out from its sandy grave. Glenn, intrigued, bent over to watch.

"The bee's right wing seemed all right, but the left one was "crumpled like a piece of paper." As he knelt down watching the bee, Glenn concluded that the bee would never fly again.

"The bee, however, had other ideas. With great patience, the bee stretched and tried its damaged wing, moving it slowly up and down. It ran its legs along the length of the wing, trying to straighten it out. Then the bee attempted to fly. It managed an elevation of three inches before crashing back to earth. It tried again, and again. Each effort was a little more successful, though sometimes the bee would fly erratically this way or that. At last, the bee took off, buzzed over the stream, and was gone.

"As the bee disappeared," Glenn later wrote, "I realized that I was still on my knees, and I remained on my knees for some time." [6 ¶s originally cited by Alan Stewart, used in "A Faith that Does Not Quit" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

In our scripture today, we have two parables that seem to be about prayer. In the first, a persistent widow badgers an unjust judge until he finally grants her justice. In the second, a Pharisee highlights

his accomplishments for God while a tax collector pleads for mercy. We usually read these parables separately, learning from the first about the value of persistence in prayer, and from the second, the value of humility in prayer.

But in between these two parables, Jesus asks a revealing question: When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? Faith is more than prayer, which leads me to an inescapable conclusion that Jesus is talking here about more than persistent and humble prayer. To be sure, prayer is vital. I don't mean to undermine that teaching, only to suggest that Jesus pushes it further. I think he's offering insight into how we live a life of faith. The author of Hebrews tells us that "...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Another translation reads "...faith is the reality of things hoped for, the evidence of what we don't yet see."

When I was a child, I wanted to be an oceanographer for a while. I got the idea that oceanography is what I wanted to do from a story about Jacques Cousteau in my 3rd Grade Reading Textbook. I still remember it, clear as day. Cousteau talked about sitting on the boat preparing for a dive. He looked out over the water and all he saw was gray water and blue sky. Gray and Blue. It was beautiful, the water and the sky, but it was...well...there's only so much you can say about gray and blue. Then he put on his oxygen tank and his scuba gear and plunged beneath those rolling gray waves. In doing so, he was transported to another world—one full of every color you can possibly image. Coral reefs and schools of fish, an octopus, lobster, a shipwreck, starfish, sunlight and shadow playing beneath the water. More than anything, I wanted to see and study that 'other world' that Jacques Cousteau had helped me discover. Such are the dreams of a kid.

Well, I didn't become an oceanographer. Nevertheless, I have lived that dream out in my adult life. You see, that's what faith is for me—a plunge beneath the surface—a journey that takes me to a strange and beautiful world full of its own color and vitality and depth. I can't survive there yet. Not for any length of time. Invariably, I have to resurface in a world of gray and blue. But my faith knows there's a world out there that's coming – one waiting to be born, one God is shaping even now, one built quietly, prayer by prayer, step by step, heart by heart, life by life.

We see it when we learn the lessons Jesus teaches today. He begins by telling us that he shares these lessons so that we would not lose heart. In other words, so we don't lose hope. We could see why that widow would lose heart, can't we? What kind of justice she needs is not detailed, but Jesus' audience would have known that a widow was a powerless figure in dire circumstances because a woman by herself had no source of income, no rights to property, and no one to advocate for her. Widows, orphans, and foreigners are consistently named in the Old Testament as people to whom the religious leadership have a sacred obligation to protect.

The Judge is one of those leaders. According to Deuteronomy 16, "you shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people, small and great alike. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice shall you pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you." But our judge today does not fit that bill. He doesn't particularly care about God's law or about doing what's right. He has no compassion for the widow or the orphan and no sense of ethical obligation. He wants the prestige of the office without any bother or fuss.

But despite the power imbalance here, we see quickly that our widow is not powerless, is she? She has no authority, no wealth, no recourse, but she does have willpower. She has inner strength. And she somehow finds time to go day after day after day. I wonder how long she persists? Weeks?

Months? Years? The judge finally grants her justice, not because he finds his conscience, but because she irritates him beyond bearing.

Take care not to cast God in the role of the unjust judge. Rather, consider that God is infinitely more compassionate than that jerk will ever be. God cares about justice. God cares about the disenfranchised among us. God cares about widows, orphans, and foreigners. This parable, like the one that follows it, speaks to two different sets of people. Prayer is powerful because it brings us into God's presence. As CS Lewis is famous of noting, prayer doesn't change God nearly as much as it changes me. And years ago, Frederick Buechner pointed out that 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, there may be no way of getting to your door."

Robert Dunham notes that this set him 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." [from Robert Dunham, *Whose Persistence?* In illustrations for Luke 18 on www.Sermons.com.]

Or, as Michael P. Green points out, "A common phenomenon in nature is 'the path of least resistance.' Electricity moving through a circuit will always travel where it has the "easiest" route. Rivers always travel *around* a mountain because it is easier than going through one.

"Frequently people are like that, too. It is easier to sit in front of the T.V. than to care for a neighbor's needs. It is easier to get angry at your mate and let that anger diminish (or smolder) over the course of time rather than sitting down and working the problem through. Thumbing through a *Reader's Digest* is much easier than personal Bible study. It's easier to pick up a book on prayer than to actually kneel before God and try to put our feelings, thoughts, needs, and fears into words. And so we find that we humans are prone to take the "path of least resistance."

"But there is one difference between ourselves and electricity or a river. They will never have to give an account of their choices. We will. Thus, perhaps we should incline ourselves to take the path of greatest persistence. [3 ¶s from Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Baker Publishing Group, illustrations on Luke 18, www.Sermons.com.] And not just because it's right, but because it's the way of faith in our world – the way of meaning and purpose, of diving deep to see evidence of what is not yet. It's easy to lose heart – to feel like we're knocking at a closed door until our fists are bloody and our throats have gone hoarse. Until we consider that we're not alone. We beat that path together.

And that's where the second parable comes in. We have two men praying – a pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee isn't actually a bad guy. He expresses gratitude to God. And nothing he says is a lie. He's not a thief or rogue. He's faithful to his wife. He doesn't defraud or rob people. He does fast twice a week, which is more than the law requires. He does tithe on his income, and not just the net income, either. This guy tithes on his gross income. He does everything right.

Unlike our tax collector. He's a Jew who work for Rome, the occupying military power. He bid for the right to collect taxes in a certain area, and as long as he delivers to the Roman authorities the agreed upon tax revenue for the region, the tax collector can keep whatever he brings in that's over and above that contractual amount. So he adds on surcharges and fees, and make a pretty nice living, but it's at the expense of defrauding and manipulating his neighbors, which is why he's so despised. It's a lousy way to make a living. He'll be comfortable. But lonely. There's got to be psychological ramifications to a life like that. And the second man in today's parable feels it. He stands far off, in the

back, and can't even lift his eyes to heaven. He knows he's a sinner. He knows he's caused pain. He knows he needs God's mercy.

As do we all. And that's Jesus' point. The reason the Pharisee incurs Jesus' criticism is that he's unaware of his own need. He compares himself to others. That's just not a reliable measure. This is one of those rare cases where the old King James Version of scripture actually catches Jesus' meaning better than more recent scholarly translations. The King James Version translates vs. 11 like this: "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself..." That's so revealing. He's not talking to God. He's just rehearsing everything he *does*. But he doesn't seem to remember who he *is* – a child of God in need of God. He's taken care of holiness all by himself. The Pharisee gains nothing from his prayer because he hasn't asked God to do anything with him. He hasn't invited God's work into his life.

But here's the hard question: have we? How many of us spend time in prayer running through the litany of things we're doing, the work that keeps us busy, the bills, the kids, the grandkids, the job, the marriage, the caregiving, the balancing act, the balls in the air, the committees, the groups, the teams, the classes... I mean, I could go on and on, listing everything. And it's not that God doesn't care about that. God is vastly more interested in us than we believe. God has gifted us, invested in us, seen all that we can be. But God has more for us than the litany of things we do.

I don't know why people still go hungry when we have the resources to feed everyone. I don't know why making money is sometimes prioritized over healthcare or medications. I don't know why we haven't learned to conquer greed. I don't know why things aren't always fair. I don't know why we still blow each other to bits on a battlefield and expect to find winners at the end. I don't know why we cling to rivalries and sides to fill a need for belonging. I don't know why we are so afraid of people whose skin color is different, whose faith is different, whose language is different, who love someone of the same gender, whose gender identity isn't straight-forward, who are differently abled or differently labeled. I don't know why the human response to difference is too often fear and hate. I don't know why human nature is as it is. There are so many things I don't understand, so many unjust judges spreading callousness and apathy, and so many nights I spend in prayer where I feel like I'm knocking on perpetually closed doors until my knuckles (and maybe even my forehead) are bloody.

But I do know that I'm not alone – that we're not alone. We're not the only one praying, knocking, banging, crying, hurting for something different. And because I'm human, I'm sometimes my own worst enemy. Jesus doesn't tell us these parables to answer the great unknowns. How I wish he had. He tells to build faith on earth. He tells us to let us know we're not alone. We're part of something. And God cares about it. And God cares about us. And God is working on it...and on us. And God's answer to it, all too often, is you and me and our hopeful voices and our bloody fists and our ragged prayers and our humble gifts. Which is why I bother with stewardship year after year. It's not about plugging numbers into a spreadsheet. It's about living God's mission out in this time and place. Anybody can say that they have hope. But the ones who put in their dollars, their prayers, their time, and their talent – we sacrifice and work for that hope. And Jesus calls us to it even when it seems that our prayers aren't answered and the world isn't with us.

They say that the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing while expecting different results. But Jesus says prayer isn't the same thing each time. Each time is new. And each time God is in it, and you can't predict how God is going to work it out. So don't lose that heart. Stay hopeful. Stay humble and know your need for God. Like that bee in the sand, keep following the path of more persistence. Keep talking. Keep pouring your heart out before God. And God will fill it up with all you need. And just maybe – prayer by prayer, step by step, heart by heart, life by life – our work to love the whole city and love the city whole will be an answer to someone else's prayers. Thanks be to God. Amen.