

Sermon Text: Luke 18:1-8

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, this is not my favorite Gospel text. I've been struggling with it for a couple of weeks now. I was talking yesterday to my wife, Caroline, about this text and what it meant. She said that the judge did not fear God and he did not fear man, but she said the point was that he did fear woman and rightly so. When I looked at her, we were in the car, she was smiling, but not in a good way. That was her take on it. I'm going in a different direction.

I find it easy in some of the parables to see where God is. In the prodigal son parable, we all see God as the waiting Father, the forgiving Father, the Father who rejoices when his son comes home. Yes, that is the God that Jesus reveals, but in this parable, there is trouble. There is no way to find a picture of God in the unjust judge, alone, aloof, uncaring. That is not God.

Two things about parables. Parables often have more than one point, and the judge in this story is the exact opposite of the God Jesus calls Abba, daddy. No, God is not the judge in this parable. This is one of those how much more parables. Jesus was saying if a selfish, arrogant, unfeeling, unjust judge can help when you when you ask intently then how much more will God, who loves you, respond when you ask? If an unrighteous, selfish so and so can give justice, how much more will the holy and righteous God give it and quickly?

But still, I'm not satisfied. If I dwelt on that alone, you could, and a few people would leave here today thinking that the preacher said if I bother God enough then God will give in and give me what I want. No! No! Now, do I think that God wants constant prayer from us? I do. I do think that if we forget or neglect to pray then we show God we are not really serious about what we are praying for. This Scripture would be far easier to preach if Jesus told it this way. Now, he didn't, but if he did.

Verily, I tell you that once upon a time there was a good lady, who lived next door to an atheist, and she prayed out loud, and then the atheist would come and mock her, make fun of her, and say why are you praying? You're crazy. There is no God. She kept praying. One day, she ran out of groceries, and as usual she was praying to God about her situation and thanking Him for what He was going to do. As usual, the atheist heard and thought to himself, "Huh! I will fix her!" So he went to the grocery store, and he bought a whole bunch of groceries, and he put these groceries on her front porch. He rang the doorbell, and he hid in the bushes to see what she would do. When she opened the door and saw all of those groceries, she began to praise God with all her heart, jumping up and down, and shouting everywhere. The atheist then jumped out of the bushes and told her, "You crazy old lady, God didn't buy you these groceries! I bought you those groceries!" Well, then she took to running down the street, jumping up and

down and praising God. Finally, he caught up with her and said, "What is your problem? I told you, I bought those groceries." She said, "Oh no, no! I knew the Lord would provide me with groceries, but I didn't know that He would have the Devil pay for them!"

Now, if Jesus had told it this way, then we could see the power of persistent prayer winning out over a worldly and self-centered person and a bitter person, and we could rejoice, but that is not the way Jesus told this. Some of the illustrations Jesus uses to encourage us to never give up are very, very odd. One you will remember is about a neighbor who has unexpected guests, and he goes knocking on the door, knocking on the window to wake up the man to give him some bread so he can feed his guests, and he keeps knocking and knocking, and the guy says, "No, go away. I'm already in bed. My whole family is in bed." The guy keeps knocking until finally he gets up, and he gives him the bread. That's one of the odd stories.

The other is here where the unjust judge who neither fears God nor has respect for anyone, and finally the woman wears him down, and she gets the justice that she needs.

There is another related story. If your earthly father knows how to give good gifts then how much more will your Heavenly Father know what you need and what is a good gift? If a child of an earthly father asks for an eel, you will not give him a snake or a scorpion. The idea is that earthly people know how to give good gifts, and must trust God to know how to give good gifts. How much more, how much more will God do what is right for you?

God is not indifferent to us. In fact, we are told that even before a word is on our lips, God already knows it. Why then should we need to persist in our prayers? Some of us say the same prayers day after day after day, and we don't seem to get an answer. John Wesley said, and I paraphrase, that even though prayer does not change God, it can very often change us. Faith means trusting God's ability to give us what we need, but not always what we want. Faith, trusting God even when things don't seem to be going our way. Trusting God even though things seem to stay the same, and our prayers seem to be unheard. Faith that God does care and can and will, in God's time, work things together for the good, and give us what we need.

Will Willimon says, "If we really believe in the power of prayer, if we really believe that prayer can effect world peace, if we are truly convinced that prayer changes things, changes us, heals broken lives and restores severed relationships, then we would be praying constantly." You couldn't keep us from praying, but isn't the problem with prayer the one that Jesus addresses here. We simply lose heart. We simply stop praying.

Jesus concludes the story of the widow with a question. When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth? To pray believing, to pray trusting God is evidence of faith. If you're giving up on prayer because you didn't get the answers you wanted, that is evidence of something else.

There is a story that may be true. I'm not sure. Mother Teresa once approached a prestigious foundation for money to build a hospital for people living with Aids. Two distinguished lawyers presided over the foundation, and they talked it over, and said, "This is just not something we're going to do. Let's listen to her and politely say no." So little, tiny Mother Teresa came in asking for the money, and they said no. She said, let us pray. She folded her hands, bowed her head in prayer. The lawyers rolled their eyes, but they bowed their heads and prayed, too. She came to the end of the prayer and said, "Amen." She went through the request again, "I would like the money to build a hospital for people living with Aids." Again, they firmly, but politely said no. She said, "Let us pray." She folded her hands, and bowed her head, and she prayed again, and she looked up once again with her request. One of the lawyers said, "All right, all right! Give me the checkbook." She is an example to us to persist in our prayers and persist in raising up before the powerful of the world the needs of the least among us.

Faith, we know, if we struggle seriously with it, is something that is worked out often in fear and trembling, waiting, and there are unanswered prayers, and we need to ask ourselves the question, should all of our prayers be answered? No. The question that haunts me is not about prayer, but the final point, faith. Will God find faith on the earth, waiting and believing faith, that in God's time things will be worked out? There's something more that tugs at me and is pulling at me about this parable. If one of the characters, and I do say if one of the characters must be God, as we see God in the waiting father in that prodigal parable, if one of the characters in this parable must be God, then the one that acts and sounds most like God is the widow! Not the judge! The one that sounds and acts most like you and me is the judge, not the widow! The judge cares for no one, has power, but uses it only for himself, gives nothing not even what he should unless there is something in it for himself. The widow disconnected from the community, with no husband, no mention of children, she was penniless and powerless, maybe homeless, and she has only one thing – persistence! Persistence! She keeps coming and coming and coming.

Widows in Jesus' day were among the most vulnerable people in society. A more powerless person couldn't be found, and if you look through the Gospels, especially Luke, you find that Jesus keeps turning our ideas of power upside down and making the powerless, and making what we might consider the bad guy, the hero of the story! The weak guy or the bad guy! The Good Samaritan rather than the priest and the Levite. The Samaritan is the good guy. Zaccheus is a tax collector, but he becomes the good tax collector. The rich man and Lazarus have their fortunes absolutely reversed in the after life! The poor man Lazarus is in Heaven and Abraham's bosom in the parable, and the rich man is in Hell. Jesus himself, the ultimate reversal! He's condemned to die on a cross, and then God makes Him victorious through the resurrection. The widow's one heroic super power is simply never giving up. She has no other resource, but persistence.

Persistence! I think this just might be one of those upside down stories Jesus is fond of telling. What if we do look at the widow as God and us, you and me, as the judge

character? That's not in the commentaries that way, but just for a moment, let's pretend that this is a part of the point. The widow knocks and knocks and knocks and seeks to force a decision for justice and righteousness. If we, the judge, are selfish, but look not for justice, not for righteousness, but what's in it for us, the widow pursues us relentlessly, trying to make us do what we are called to do. Righteousness, justice, love for neighbor, and finally if the story comes out right, we give in. We give in. It could be. If we insist on making God one of the characters in this parable, and we don't have to insist on that, but if we do, then it must be the persistent widow, and the unrighteous, selfish judge must be us.

God continually comes calling us to our truest selves, and to care for God and for justice and for others, and each of us like the self-centered judge can't be bothered unless it pays off personally. It could be. Where is faith? Well, faith is when we finally respond to a God, who has been hounding us our whole life.

There's a true story about a man named Francis. His father very much wanted him to be a priest, but Francis flunked out of seminary. Francis then studied medicine, and after six years of trying, he flunked out of medicine. He then sold newspapers for a while, and after that, he developed a very bad drug addiction, and then contracted tuberculosis. It was at this point of utter turmoil and with every reason to despair that Francis Thompson wrote the poem, "The Hound of Heaven." In the midst of a horrid addiction and dying of tuberculosis when just about everybody was giving up on him, and would have suggested that the judge dismiss him as unworthy, Francis had the audacity to write a poem that spoke of God pursuing him still with great tenacity and with the love of a forgiving mother whose child can do no wrong, God pursued him. In the words of the poem, "God pursued him with unhurrying chase, an unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic constancy." He said, "I fled Him down the nights and down the days. I fled Him down the arches of the years. I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways of my mind and in the midst of tears. I fled Him, God, the hound of Heaven."

Yes, the persistent widow echoes God's character to me. My title is "Who's That Knocking at My Heart." Who is that knocking at my heart? Who is that saying, decide for love and righteousness and justice? Well, it's God! It has always been God. There may be two messages here. Be persistent in your prayer, if you're serious about it, be persistent in it, and watch out, watch out self-centered and uncaring people. Watch out detached, aloof, powerful people, who give no respect to God or the needs of others. God is coming for you. God is after you. God will not let you be happy with less than Himself no matter how much money, no matter how much power, God will be knocking and knocking and knocking at your heart until you decide. Then the final question makes more sense. When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith? When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith in your heart? Amen.