

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Luke 18:1-8

FAITH THAT TAKES HOLD

“Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a sparrow asked a wild dove. “Nothing more than nothing,” was the answer. “In that case I must tell you a marvelous story,” the sparrow said. “I sat on the branch of a fir tree, close to its trunk, when it began to snow, not heavily, not in a raging blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn’t have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the very next snowflake dropped onto the branch – nothing more than nothings, as you say – the branch broke off.” Having said that, the sparrow flew away. The dove thought about the story for a while and finally said to herself: “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come about in the world.” (Pax Christa, *A Race To Nowhere*)

That simple yet powerful story serves to introduce Jesus’ parable, which is found in Luke’s Gospel. I doubt that the widow petitioned the judge with as many requests as there were snowflakes that fell on the branch, but it’s quite clear that someone had wronged her and she wasn’t giving up until the unjust judge finally ruled in her favor. So she “kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent!’” Like the accumulation of all those snowflakes that led to the eventual collapse of the branch, the widow’s tenacity ultimately took its toll on the judge, and he finally gave in and gave her the justice she deserved.

Both the person, who had wronged her, and this judge, who continued to ignore her, should have known better. Repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we read “The Lord your God is God... God executes justice for the orphan, and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (Deut. 10:17). Since it is God’s revealed will and commandment that widows, orphans, and strangers were to be looked after, the judge especially should have known the law and upheld it accordingly, but this judge did not.

Jesus provided the clue for the judge’s continued stubbornness and deafness to the widow’s repeated pleas for justice. The unjust judge said to himself, “I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone.” His attitude and his lack of action in the widow’s case clearly showed that he never considered God and cared even less what others thought. He refused to hear the widow’s case, and thus, refused her justice.

However, over time, the judge changed his mind. The widow, for her part, persisted and pestered the judge. She refused to give up. The judge, who had no qualms at saying, “No!” had met his match with this widow woman and her perseverance par excellence. He said to himself, “Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not *wear me out* by continually coming.” Her constant presence and pressure, her nagging and crying out for justice to be served, ultimately wore the judge down and he finally ruled in her favor.

Having unpacked the parable, there is still the motive to be dealt with— why did Jesus tell this story in the first place? Luke says right up front, “Jesus told the parable (to his disciples) that they should always pray and not give up” (or “not lose heart”). We know from Luke’s narrative that Jesus was enroute to Jerusalem and the cross. Once

there, Jesus would suffer at the hands of both the Romans and the religious leaders.

Jesus' disciples would surely be tempted to lose heart and would, in fact, flee for their lives prior to his death. And, Luke was writing to the church in the latter third of the first century; the church of that era would also be tempted to lose heart due to struggles within their own families, conflicts between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and imposed threats and persecutions from the authorities.

Then, as if Luke 18:1 were not obvious enough, at the conclusion of the story, Jesus reaffirmed the parable's meaning, which was something he typically did not do with his parables. Jesus employed a "lesser to greater" argument in his teaching method. That is to say, if the wicked judge, who didn't care about justice eventually ruled favorably in the widow's case for all the wrong reasons, *how much more*, will God whose very being resolutely seeks justice for humans ensure that God's justice is established on earth. Furthermore, after his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus wanted to know if he would find that kind of persistent faith on earth when he returns?

The parable ends with that open-ended question waiting to be answered by Jesus' disciples standing there, by his later disciples, who would first read Luke's telling of this story, by the saints throughout the centuries, and by us gathered here in Jesus' name today. Will we continue to pray and not lose heart? Will we persist and have faith?

While we ponder those questions, it helps to affirm that this parable is a story about the trustworthiness of God. God will always be persistent in dealing with us for God loves us with a love that will not let go of us. God desires to be in relationship with us, and God will stop at nothing in order for that to happen. After all, this is the God who came to us in Jesus Christ, the one who loved us persistently all the way to the cross, the empty tomb, and beyond. And, this is the same God, who has poured out the Spirit upon the church and dwells within us so that God can love us up close at all times.

The Lord our God has given us the gift of prayer so that we may call upon God, commune with God, and deepen our love for and our commitment to God. Even our faith is God's gift to us so that we might believe in Jesus the Son and have life, and really come alive to God's goodness in this life and the next.

And, what about those times in our prayer life when God seems to be absent or, at least, silent? What do we do when we pray and pray, but nothing seems to happen? We keep on being persistent in our prayers and our faith for, based on the biblical witness, we know (by faith) that God is there, always. We don't have to wear God down until we get our way because it doesn't work that way. Sometimes, God is teaching us in the silence to wait and be patient for God's unfolding answer – on God's terms and in God's own time. Sometimes, I think God wants us to figure out matters on our own. Sometimes, while prayer may not change our situations or circumstances, prayer quite often changes us, as we grow wiser and more mature. Sometimes, I believe God just wants us to trust. As I grow older, more and more, I am okay with not having all of the answers to my prayers and questions, as long as I know I am God's beloved child and that God is forever holding on to me with all tenderness and love, no matter what!

Frederick Buechner tells about the time he "was sitting by the side of the road one day. It was a dark time in my life. I was full of anxiety, fear and uncertainty. The world within seemed as shadowy as the world without. And then, as I sat there, I spotted a car coming down the road toward me with one of those license plates that you can get by paying a little extra with a word on it instead of just numbers and a letter or two. And of

all the words the license plate might have had on it, the word that it did have was the word T-R-U-S-T: TRUST. And as it came close enough for me to read, it became suddenly for me a word from on high, and I give it to you as a word from on high also for you... The world is full of dark shadows to be sure, both the world without and the world within... but the word is *trust*. Trust the deepest intuitions of your own heart. Trust the source of your own truest gladness. Trust the road. Above all else, trust (God). Trust (God).” (*A Room Called Remembrance*, pages 149-150)

Thus, we pray in order to enhance our relationship with God, and we trust because God is trustworthy. How much more will God give to God’s chosen ones more so than the unjust judge? And, the answer is a great deal more for God will indeed grant justice to those who cry to God day and night.

I also hear in this parable, and throughout Luke’s Gospel, that we are not called to simply wait for God to do justice. No, we are called to be partners with God in bringing justice to the earth. Remember the opening story? After the sparrow told about the “nothing more than nothing” snowflake that fell upon the branch of the fir tree and brought the branch crashing to the ground, the dove reflected further, “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come about in the world.” We too are called to play our part with a persistent faith that constantly issues forth in good works, which results in bringing peace and justice to the world. Jesus wants his disciples to exhibit a tenacious faith that holds on to God and holds on to what is right, and then sees to it that justice prevails. The widow in Jesus’ story models for us the way of life oriented to justice that is required of believers in an unjust world until Jesus returns to establish God’s just reign. She exhibits an “active faith” that lives consistently for God’s justice. In telling this story, Jesus makes it clear that we, his disciples, are to go and do likewise!

In a recent telephone conversation, I was reminded of an earlier time in my ministry. The growing number of homeless persons moving into our county, which was just north of Dallas, TX, concerned our ministerial alliance. I was one of three ministers asked to give some thought to addressing this vital issue. We gathered nine other laypersons together with us and - what else? - we formed a committee, which in time became a board. We met for two hours, almost every week, for eighteen months. We prayed constantly and worked strenuously to get others to help turn the vision into a reality. After months and months of frustration and oft times little results, eventually one of our large Presbyterian churches in downtown Dallas, who has a significant ministry to the homeless and the hungry, gave us a ten thousand dollar grant. A month later, the Samaritan Inn night shelter was opened for business. In that recent phone call, I learned that the Samaritan Inn is still going strong over twenty years later, and it serves an average of 130 persons a day.

That story, that ministry, is more about the trustworthiness of God than it is about anyone of us, who was involved in the creation of the Samaritan Inn. God is faithful and will grant justice to the children in need. And yet, God invites us to take hold of our faith and to act on it so that we are partners in serving up justice and meeting the needs of others. I talked earlier about the reasons why God may be silent in terms of answering our prayers. However, God is not silent about God’s desire that we might be or become the answer to someone else’s prayers.

Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Yes, God will, and God, quite often, will do so through you and me. Thus, as God’s hungry children cry out for help, many of you have done justice through your work at Grace Network or through the numerous gifts of spaghetti sauce and pasta you have brought here to be distributed

there. And, when women and their children, who are battered physically or emotionally, find their way to Citizens Against Family Violence for help, you are one of the ways God is answering their cry for justice to be done.... and on and on and on.

Don't just hold on to faith. Be sure to take hold of faith and turn it inside out so that we can move further into the community with the gospel and love of Jesus Christ. In this way, we may do our part to move mountains of injustice and cause justice and peace to take root - all because the voice of one more person (or congregation) was heard in the world - all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
October 17, 2010