

Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 24C]

October 20, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 121; Luke 18:1-8

Grace and peace to you from God --- Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Amen

Four members of the clergy had a theological argument, with the three male ministers siding against the female minister. The woman prayed, "Lord, I know I'm right. Please send us a divine sign to prove it."

A big storm cloud materialized, and there was a clap of thunder, "See," said the woman. "It's a sign from above. "The three clergymen disagreed, saying thunder is a common phenomenon

"Dear Lord," the woman prayed, "I need a bigger sign." This time a bolt of lightning slammed into a tree. "See! I told you I was right," the woman said. But the men insisted nothing had happened that couldn't be explained by natural causes.

"Help me, Lord," the woman implored. And a deep voice came from the heavens: "SSSHHEEE'S RRRRIIGGGHHHTTT!!!" The woman turned to the three clergymen and asked, "Well?" "Okay, okay," they said. "But it's still three against two."

What is the difference between persistence and stubbornness? What makes perseverance different from obstinacy? (*Ask for some opinions.*) In the case of stubbornness and obstinacy, one refuses to move or change one's opinion or chosen course of action even when contradictory evidence or circumstances arise. In essence, when we are stubborn we are saying, "Don't try to confuse me with facts. I know what is right."

Some might say the widow in today's parable was just plain stubborn and rewarded for it. But Jesus gives clues of something different. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Being a woman in a man's world under no man's protection meant a widow in Jesus' times was the epitome of vulnerable, relegated to the outer edges, dependent on the generosity of others, which likely left her poor. This marginalized widow goes before the powerful, designated dispenser of justice. In her case, a judge who could care less about God, people or what is right. What chance does this woman have against the likes of him? What chance do we feel we have against the likes of

violence, homelessness, chronic busyness, declining church attendance, or loved ones suffering.

Yet the widow goes before the judge, boldly stating her case. When he denies her pleas, she does not quietly slink away, resigned to her helplessness. She continues to seek justice in the only way she can — by returning to that judge again and again to give her one sentence plea, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” She sinks her teeth into her pursuit of justice like a guard dog who will not let go of an intruder’s pant leg. God may not get to this judge. People may not get to him. But this insignificant, powerless widow gets to him. He judges in her favor to finally be rid of her.

It would be the natural temptation to look at this story and focus on the payoff. Jesus *does* say that if such an unjust judge would finally respond to persistent pleading, how much more will the Lord who IS just and good respond to the cries of God’s children. We want the moral of the tale to be, “Persevere and be persistent in prayer and God will bless you with whatever you request. But we know in our deeps that’s too simplistic. There are unscrupulous people who are prosperous. Faithful disciples who live in poverty. Selfish, harmful people who have perfect health and God-loving, prayerful folks who suffer with cancer or chronic illness. This isn’t a parable about rubbing the genie’s lamp or nagging, crying, pouting until the overwhelmed parent relents. It’s about “not losing heart”... being persistent in faith and faithfulness.

That widow kept going before that judge who knows how long — despite any feelings of discouragement; regardless of the response she got – because the alternative was to forget about justice altogether and take to her bed with a box of Kleenex and a belly of bitterness. You see, prayer is like wrestling with God and refusing to let go. Prayer is hanging on to Jesus who hung on the cross, hanging on to the One whose weakness and defeat proved to be stronger and more victorious than any earthly powers. Prayer is planting ourselves squarely in the presence of the Creator of all, refusing to budge, believing there are unforeseen outcomes and future healings to come because we trust in

the Lord who proved on an Easter morning to have the power and determination to bring new life even out of death. In prayer, we bring our anger, hurts, frustrations, despair and hopes before One who can be trusted to take us seriously, who cares and listens with a compassionate heart. It is in the persistent, honest conversation of prayer we grab hold of our good and mighty God who already has hold of us. With the very strength of God flowing into us, we can persevere, daring to believe, despite any appearances to the contrary, that God will have the final say and victory.

Faith-driven persistence is such an important virtue and discipline of the Christian life. We don't speak of it often enough. At baptism, we are called into a relationship to God and neighbor that is to grow and mature. *Christian* is not just a religious designation on a form but a way of life. The way we grow in our faith is through being persistent in prayer, studying Scripture, worship, service and sharing our experiences with one another. In that persistent pursuit of a deeper relationship with our Lord and neighbor, we built the chops to persevere through the times and circumstances that threaten to undermine our pursuit of justice and a world as God would have it. When we may feel discouraged or anxious about the future of the church, we cannot stop any more than the widow in the story can. We keep doing God's work. We keep feeding the hungry, give away school supplies; provide a safe and loving place for children to trick or treat and look for more ways to make a difference. When we are worried about money, we still send mission support to the Synod who sends 50% on to the national church of the ELCA. We persist in this faithfulness that may seem foolhardy to some because last year it made it possible to plant and support 357 new Lutheran congregations in the US, to send 230 missionaries to more than 48 countries and supported more than 84 Young Adults to engage in Global Mission work in 11 countries.

Be persistent in prayer even when you don't see the point. Be persistent in pursuing justice for all God's people even when it seems overwhelming. Be persistent in generosity

even when it pinches. It's the way of Christ that will make us as formidable as the widow in the parable.

I'm sure many who hear about a widow returning each day to plead before an unjust judge think her a fool or delusional. In a world that measures worth by profitable outcomes and obvious gain, prayer and seeking justice can seem just as foolish. But to those who follow Jesus, prayer is a powerful act and profession of faith. Prayer grows out of the persistent nature of a faith in a Lord who's proven trustworthy. Through that prayer, God persists in holding fast to us, pouring love and hope into us, even when we cannot see or feel it. That's how prayer helps us not to lose heart. Prayer places us in the steadfast faithfulness and power of God's presence, where we know we are not alone, we will never be abandoned or without hope, because like the prophet wrote:

“Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.” (Is. 40: 31)

Linda M Alessandri 10/19/19

(Hymn 787, “On Eagle’s Wings”)