

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

MORE POWERFUL THAN CYNICISM

We hear of a judge, who was supposed to be a public servant. However, in his position of power, he wouldn't do what the position required – that is to make legal decisions that carried out justice. He didn't care what God thought of him. He utterly ignored the scriptures, the Hebrew law that called for significant concern to be given to widows and others who lacked status or power in that place. This judge also didn't care what other people thought of him. With his appointment to his position, he was a big dog that was set for life and he wasn't going to lift a paw to do anything other than what was in his own interest. There was a woman who had a case before this judge. Since her husband had died, she found herself among the least powerful people in the whole town. She couldn't sign legal papers for herself. She couldn't own property. She had no way to provide for herself. The woman sought nothing more than what was just and right, but the judge didn't care enough to pay any attention to her case and he ruled against her. She would not have had the resources to use an appellate court if there had been one, which there wasn't. There seemed to be no hope for the woman's situation. So she decided to adopt the same cynicism that had shaped the judge's life and she ended up dying in despair.

I dare say that may well be how a real life story actually played out during the time of Jesus' ministry. But this other-kind-of- story-telling rabbi comes up with a different ending. Instead of the widow sinking into despair because she had no recourse to challenge the judge's decision against her, she instead uses the only thing left in her power to effect change. She rightly recognized that the judge was motivated only by his own comfort so she pressed to make him uncomfortable until he did what was right by her. As a result, the judge changed his ruling and the woman, through her persistence, got justice.

It reminds me of a story about Sojourner Truth, who was a 19th century slave woman who could neither read nor write. But she had a voice and she used her gift of speechmaking to push for the abolition of slavery and better treatment for all women. One day when she was giving an abolitionist speech, she was heckled by a man who said, "Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Why I don't care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea." Sojourner Truth replied, "Perhaps not, but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching."¹ Persistence can have its effects even on the big dogs who seem to be running things.

We note that Luke introduces the parable Jesus tells indicating that its point was about the need for his followers to make their appeals to God and to not lose heart in doing so. It was a fitting story for the early church, for whom Luke had written this account, a group of believers who felt like they were about as powerless as a disenfranchised widow. They too had been mistreated. Plenty of Christians had been arrested and persecuted, even killed for their faith. Their situation was dire, their need for justice urgent. But as they looked at the power of a ruthless Roman Empire, they had plenty of reason to simply sink into a cynical despair that recognized a likely outcome, that part of the church would be executed and the rest of it would slink away in a hopeless fear. But upon hearing Jesus' parable about a widow's persistence, they would recognize that even if someone as slimy as a self-enamored judge could finally be goaded to enact a just ruling, how much more could they count on a loving and mindful God to respond to their tireless pleas for justice. The great God to whom they prayed was more powerful than the judge in the story. The good God they worshiped was someone who actually cared about justice as well as the church's wellbeing. Through Luke we hear Jesus telling his followers that if they prayed with persistence, God would help them without delay.

That's really very good to hear, but frankly, as we look around at what is going on in the world today, the 'without delay part' is a bit hard to believe. There has been so much injustice in the world. Hebrews and Africans had been enslaved for centuries before abolition came, and still human trafficking continues even today. Six million Jews were killed in the holocaust. Certainly, these people were praying. What about the people of Syria, Afghanistan, and Nigeria today? There have been so many people who lack power who have been so mistreated. We pray and pray and pray and the world is still a mess. Even Luke would later describe Jesus himself praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, seeking a way that avoided his destruction. Yes, that prayer lifted by our Lord himself was on the night before his crucifixion. Sometimes we wonder whether God is truly great and good.

And yet, although Jesus went through the suffering of the cross, that wasn't the end of the story. As those who pray, we are a people to be shaped by resurrection hope instead of cynicism. Yes, at times, since there are indifferent judges and people in power who seek only their own comfort and gratification, great injustices take place. At times, a transformation that looks like an answer to prayer does not come about until intense suffering has already occurred. I often do not understand God's timing. And while faith seeks understanding, it can't be totally dependent upon attaining full understanding beforehand. If we only believe what we fully understand, we will likely move toward cynicism. But as people of faith, we could be part of the answer to prayers offered by those who are among the most vulnerable in our world. We don't just pray to God; we pray while we also advocate with those in power on behalf of the most vulnerable who are being abused, mistreated, and killed. Not by cynicism, but with resurrection hope, we can become persistent fleas to the big dogs that wouldn't be inclined to take action otherwise.

Some of the big things we pray for may not end up happening in our lifetimes, but still we pray with words and with actions. It was while he was discussing such things that theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote the following: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love."² Watch the news - there are abundant reasons for cynicism. But we are good news/gospel people. We are called to be people of hope, faith, and love who pray persistently and baptize joyfully and advocate faithfully and give of ourselves generously. Melissa and Jim, even now is a time to be teaching little Henry about prayer and the God to whom we pray.³ For the prayers before meals might I suggest the one that begins, "God is great, God is good." And maybe that simple beginning is appropriate for adult prayers also as a rejection of cynicism and an embrace of the God who truly is great and good. Amen.

¹ Taken from Marian Wright Edelman's book, Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors, published by Harper Perennial in 2000.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History, originally published in 1952.

³ Referencing a baptism that had taken place earlier in the service.