

22ND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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THE CRY FOR JUSTICE

Pastor Jim Dunn

Luke 18:1-8

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

18 And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. **2** He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. **3** And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' **4** For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, **5** yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" **6** And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. **7** And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? **8** I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Unjust judges. Courtrooms run by bad judges. A judge was asked by prosecutors to deny bail to a man who had four prior convictions. But the judge ignored the request and let the man out on bail anyway. The man immediately went out and brutally assaulted his girlfriend. Another judge had strange ideas about the purpose of bail. He had a habit of setting low bail for career criminals. But prosecutors had high hopes when they brought to this judge a case involving two courageous Wal-Mart employees. A robber, a repeat offender, was in the act of stealing a DVD player from the Wal-Mart. When the two courageous Wal-Mart employees tried to stop him, he pulled a knife on them and attempted to stab them. Prosecutors thought that this armed assault by a career criminal would certainly attract a high bail from the judge. But no, once again this judge did not disappoint and set a much lower bail than was called for.

Another judge was presiding over a murder trial. A woman had been run down in the street. Then, as she lay on the ground injured, the driver ran over her again. Then, a 12-pack of beer was flung out through the driver's side window, according to eyewitnesses. Then, the driver sped away. This was no simple case of driver negligence, so prosecutors were seeking a jail term of 12 to 15 years for the driver. But the judge decided that 3 ½ years was plenty. Yet another judge was presiding over a case involving a widow. In fact, the same case had been brought to him numerous times by this woman. Each time, she had petitioned the court to give her justice against her adversary. Each time, the judge had refused her.

Now, we're not told exactly what the widow wanted the judge to do, because that's not important. After all, unlike my other stories about bad judges, this is not a true story. It's a parable in which Jesus is trying to teach us something. So, what's important in this widow's legal case is, first of all, her opponent. That would be the one who has wronged her, or accused her, or slandered her. The one she calls her "adversary." "Give me justice against my adversary," she says to the judge. (Luke 18:3)

Is it just a coincidence, or did Jesus pick this word on purpose? **Adversary**. Not a word you use in everyday conversation. But it is one that is familiar to you because of how someone else used this word. You remember now, don't you? Peter uses that word in his first letter, 1 Peter 5:8: "Your adversary the devil goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." Yeah, it's the same word in Greek used in both verses. Does Jesus want us in this parable to think of our adversary...the devil? Does Jesus want us to consider our need for justice against our adversary the devil?

Well, you tell me. Isn't the devil the one who falsely accuses you? Who points out every sin and failing of your past, every confessed and forgiven sin, who tries to throw these sins back in your face, who doesn't want you to have a moment's peace? Hasn't the devil caused great harm to you and your family? Seeking to devour your faith and the faith of your loved ones? Hasn't the devil brought tragedy into your life? Isn't the devil the reason why you have prayed so many times, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" and "let the wicked foe have no power over me"?

Now, has the Lord granted what you asked for in those petitions? Has the Lord given you what the judge in the parable does not give the widow? Has the Lord given you justice against your adversary the devil? The unjust judge in the parable refuses to give the widow justice against her adversary. Even though she keeps coming to him numerous times. Is this unjust judge in the parable God?

At times, it appears so. When God appears to be silent towards our prayers. When the devil is getting his way. And God does not seem to respond, then that's one more reason for faith to become discouraged, to lose heart, to give up. Does God delay in answering our prayers, because it is persistence in prayer that can alone move Him to act? Well, that does not seem right. But it does seem to be what Jesus is saying in this parable. The widow finally gets from the unjust judge what she seeks but only after she has nagged him to nuisance. So, does that mean that God will not counteract the devil in our lives until after we have prayed to Him about this a certain quota of times? Then, that's one more reason for faith to become discouraged, to lose heart, to give up.

But what if this unjust judge here in the parable is not God? In 18:6, Jesus calls this judge unrighteous. "Hear what the unrighteous judge says." Would Jesus call His Father the unrighteous judge? Plus, Jesus says the unjust judge refuses to grant her justice until she has beaten him down with her continual pestering. The unjust judge delays. But Jesus promises that God will not delay in giving us justice against our adversary. "I tell you, He will give them justice speedily."

So, the unjust judge in the parable is not God. God is the just and good judge who gives us justice against our adversary the devil quickly, who responds to our prayers about the devil quickly. We perhaps don't see that. Maybe we can't see all of God's maneuverings behind the scenes, behind the curtain. But the Lord is not waiting for us to become persistent in prayer before He acts. He's not waiting for us to give Him a headache with our praying before He acts. He's not waiting for us to fold our hands and bow our heads a certain number of times before He acts. His people Israel also thought at times that God was slow in keeping His promises.

But sometimes God was doing things behind the scenes. In Daniel 10, the Lord seemed to delay in responding to a certain prayer of Daniel's. When the Lord finally did respond He tells Daniel that He had been listening all along and He had also been doing battle with the devil in Persia. (Daniel 10:12-14) Though Israel thought the Lord was slow in keeping His promises, at just the right time the Lord acted to keep His promise of sending the Messiah. At just the right time...

Israel's Messiah and ours folded His hands and bowed His head. He folded His hands around two nails and bowed His head in suffering and death. And defeated the adversary for us. Now, it did not look like the devil had been beaten. And as Jesus suffered through that ordeal, there were times it may have not felt as if He was beating the devil. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus also pleaded to God for justice against His adversary. "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death..." (Hebrews 5:7) So, when Jesus was human, even for Him how things look and how things really are were two different things. Even as He was defeating the devil for us, it did not feel like it to Him. God works behind the scenes sometimes. He works beyond what we can see. But Jesus promises God is giving us justice against our adversary the devil.

His resurrection is also the daily resurrection of our faith in this promise and the resurrection of our persistent prayers. Persistent prayers not before God will act. Persistent prayers, because God is already acting and doing. Our eyes on the cross as we pray, for there on the cross we see our judge. There on the cross we see our final judge who will come to judge the living and the dead. There on the cross, as we pray, we see our just and good judge who knows from experience the battle we're in and who promises that we are not fighting alone.

Amen