

## ***Nagging God***

Luke 18:1-8

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

October 20, 2019

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:1-8, NRSV)*

"Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

Sometimes, Luke makes things easy for us, or at least he appears to.  
Before we even get to the parable,  
before we even read the story,  
Luke provides us with the moral, the meaning,  
the golden nugget of truth to extract from Jesus' words and to stick in our pocket.  
And it's this: Always pray. Do not lose heart."  
One might think that my work here is finished.

But it's not.

It would be a travesty if we walked away from this parable with only those words.  
That's because we would miss what this parable says about God,  
about what God desires for us and from us,  
about what God promises us.

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

To whom do you pray?  
For what do you pray?  
Or maybe, do you pray?  
Why? Or, why not?

"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.  
In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying,  
'Grant me justice against my opponent.'  
For a while he refused; but later he said to himself,  
'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone,  
yet because this widow keeps bothering me,  
I will grant her justice,

so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ “

In the original Greek, the word translated “wear me out” is literally, “give me a black eye.”  
So maybe the sense here is that the judge will grant her justice so she doesn’t make him look bad.

Jesus’ parable is no fable that you can boil down to one simple truth that you them can keep at a distance.

Jesus’ story is the real world.

It emerges straight from the ugly and oppressive stories that we know very well, stories of corruption, power imbalances, and arrogant, opportunistic people in positions of power making decisions that benefit themselves while the vulnerable suffer the consequences.

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.

In Elkhart County, there was a billion-dollar company wanting to build a hundred-million-dollar prison facility and promising a million dollars each year in tax revenue.

This company profits off of our country’s mass incarceration complex.

A group of people – citizens and noncitizens alike, Democrats and Republicans alike – opposed the building project by writing letters, holding rallies, doing research, and making telephone calls.

Why?

Because they wanted to express their care and concern for all residents of the county – including those who find themselves most vulnerable.

This group of people kept gathering, they kept coming, and they kept talking until eventually, they made it easier for the city and business leaders to oppose it too.

The billion-dollar company withdrew its proposal before it was even officially considered.<sup>1</sup>

In Lansing, MI, there was a doctor who used his position to manipulate and sexually abuse patients under his care for twenty years.

Several of those patients, girls and young woman, reported him to people in authority, but their reports were dismissed, disbelieved or ignored by coaches, administrators, counselors, trainers, and police.

But they kept coming, and coming, and coming to a courtroom to tell their stories until the doctor pleaded for them to stop in order to preserve his mental health.

One hundred fifty-six of them testified, and the world listened.<sup>2</sup>

Two and a half hours northeast of here, state government officials cut costs providing services to a bankrupt city by switching its water source. When the city’s most important resident, General Motors,

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<sup>1</sup> Caleb Bauer, “CoreCivic Pulls Plans for Elkhart County Immigration Detention Center, *South Bend Tribune* (January 23, 2018). [https://www.southbendtribune.com/news/local/corecivic-pulls-plans-for-elkhart-county-immigration-detention-center/article\\_1114cbe4-ff9b-11e7-9df0-93e7fae32cdb.html](https://www.southbendtribune.com/news/local/corecivic-pulls-plans-for-elkhart-county-immigration-detention-center/article_1114cbe4-ff9b-11e7-9df0-93e7fae32cdb.html).

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Gibbons, “What Larry Nassar’s Victims Said When They Confronted Him in Court,” *Mlive.com* (January 19, 2018), [https://www.mlive.com/news/2018/01/what\\_larry\\_nassars\\_victims\\_sai.html](https://www.mlive.com/news/2018/01/what_larry_nassars_victims_sai.html).

noticed that the water from the new source was corroding its engines,  
it got a waiver to hook up to the previous source.  
Alarmed and noticing some physical problems in her children,  
Lee Anne Walters, a self-proclaimed stay at home mom,  
researched the water supply, urged her neighbors to attend city council meetings,  
and made contacts that led to widespread testing on the city water supply.  
Despite those tests showing that the water was unsafe,  
the governor insisted that it was safe to drink.  
But this mother kept coming, and coming.  
She contacted the Environmental Protection Agency,  
she handed out fact sheets,  
she notified the press, until, eventually,  
the governor was forced to concede that the water was indeed unsafe,  
the President of the United States declared a state of emergency,  
and the state of Michigan enacted the strictest water standards in the nation.<sup>3</sup>

These are all stories that, in substance, rhyme with Jesus' parable.  
If a persistent widow can get justice out of an unjust judge,  
if a community coalition can drive away a billion-company,  
if girls and young women are finally heard in court after being disbelieved and dismissed for so long,  
if LeeAnne Walters can get a reluctant governor to admit Flint's drinking water was unsafe,  
then, won't God grant justice to his chosen ones who keep crying out to him day and night?  
"I tell you", Jesus said, "God will quickly grant justice to them."

"Yet when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 19:7-8)

It's easy to lose heart, to lose faith.  
After all, new prisons for profit are still being built.  
New victims of abuse still find it hard to be believed.  
And forty-three states still have locations where water is contaminated with toxic chemicals  
linked to birth defects, cancers, and infertility<sup>4</sup>.

What can be said about a world like this?  
What is God doing in a world like this?  
And what can we do?

I've sometimes heard it said that,  
if we keep praying, if we don't give up, if we plead our hard cases over and over,

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<sup>3</sup> Lindsey Smith, "This Mom Helped Uncover What was Really Going on with Flint's Water," *Michigan Radio NPR* (December 14, 2015). <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/mom-helped-uncover-what-was-really-going-flint-s-water>.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Pascus, "New Study Claims 43 States Expose Millions to Dangerous Chemical in Drinking Water; *CBS News* (May 7, 2019). <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/drinking-water-may-contain-pfas-chemicals-in-43-states-according-to-new-study-by-environmental-working-group/>.

if we get Christians in other churches praying the same thing,  
then, then, then, God will intervene and cure the cancer, save the life, or heal the child.

In this understanding of God,  
we are like the powerless widow  
God is like the distant, all-powerful judge,  
and prayer is how we lobby God to get what we want.  
But that's not how scripture portrays God -- or prayer, for that matter.  
God is eager and willing to give good things to those who ask, particularly to those who are poorest.

I ask you this: If Jesus, is the fullest revelation of God that we have,  
then which of the two humans in Jesus' parable are most like God?

Isaiah 42

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will bring justice to the nations.  
He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.  
A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth." (Isaiah 42:1-4)

"A bruised reed he will not break,  
a smoldering wick he will not snuff out  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
he will not falter or be discouraged . . ."

If I would guess, I'd say that the predominant image of God is probably one of power,  
the Almighty King, the One who can separate the waters of the ocean  
and move mountains with awesome displays of power.  
And in truth, Jesus does speak of this mountain-moving ability of our God  
and of all those who put their trust in God.

But Jesus demonstrates another kind of God's power—  
power that was humbled and born in a lowly animal trough,  
power that was made evident in a shameful death on a cross,  
power that the Apostle Paul speaks of as being made perfect in weakness.  
This is the power of God that does not take the world by storm,

that does not say,

"Hey, I'm going to set the world straight and put everyone in their place and fix this crazy mess!"

Can we believe in a nagging God?

Nagging in the sense of one who willingly takes a position of weakness

and won't give up either on a world bent on injustice

or on human beings bent towards sin?

A God who won't give up on you and those you love?

God's power as revealed in Jesus is the power that infiltrates the world by stealth,

that creeps into human hearts and changes the world subtly, from the inside out.

Can we believe in a God who has this kind of power, who works this way in the world?

Can we trust in One whose power is made evident through powerlessness,

like this persistent widow pleading her case in court?

Like a group of ordinary citizens with no weapon except their voice?

Like 156 young women armed with nothing but the truth?

Like a stay at home mom in Flint Michigan?

And if we do, if we say yes to this God,

then how does this one call out to us?

Luke, more than any other evangelist,

shows Jesus at prayer as a regular practice and at critical turning points in the Gospel:

at his baptism (3:21), Jesus prayed;

before his choice of the Twelve (6:12), Jesus prayed;

before Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah (9:18), Jesus prayed;

at the Transfiguration (9:28, 29), Jesus prayed;

in preparing his disciples for his death, Jesus prayed;

before his arrest on the Mount of Olives (22:39-46), Jesus prayed;

and on the cross (23:46); Jesus prayed.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray as he did.

Too often, when I hear people mention prayer,

they use the adjective "just" to precede it: "Just prayer."

As in all I can offer is "just prayer."

When certain situations are beyond our control to fix,

we shake our heads and say all we can do is "just pray" about it.

I think Jesus is also teaching his disciples to engage in "just prayer."

But not "just" as in "only", not just as in "merely,"

but "just" as in "justice" and "righteousness."

Prayer is the power that exposes the injustice that is still present in this world,

Prayer is the power that unveils the kingdom of the God of justice.

We know, as Jesus knows, that there is a big difference between God's justice and the world's justice.

Justice in this world *is* often blind:

blind to the needs of the powerless and the poor and the prisoner and people of color but eyes wide open to the powerful, the respected, the white, and the wealthy.

Yet, without allowing anyone or anything to challenge what we accept as normal, we become blind to the injustices embedded within our culture, our economy, and ourselves. It's no accident that Jesus uses a widow seeking justice as he teaches about prayer.

They belong together, because prayer is one way in which we become alive to the clash of the kingdoms and the presence of God in our midst.

"Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

Perhaps Jesus is asking his followers to be like that persistent widow in their prayer life because that is how they become like their God.

Prayer empowers us to join hands with the God revealed in Jesus.

The God who keeps coming, and coming, and coming, on behalf of the poor, the vulnerable, the sinners, hammering on the doors closed to justice in this world until those doors open

to reveal a glimpse of God's kingdom that is and is yet to come.

Amen.