

FINDING FAITH

LUKE 18:1-8

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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There are not many of Jesus' teachings that are as forthcoming about what they mean as ours is today.

Often Jesus speaks in riddles and stories, confusing, confounding, even angering his hearers (particularly if his hearers were very religious ☺).

Often, Jesus' teachings leave us to connect the dots for ourselves.

But not today. Our text today begins like this:

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

And so we know what we are supposed to take from this text before we even begin. It is a text about prayer, generally, and about the need to persevere in prayer, more specifically.

Jesus illustrates with the story of a desperate widow crying out for justice to an unjust judge.

It is a story of deliberately stark contrasts.

There would have been few categories of people as vulnerable as "widows" in the first century world. Widows were quite literally at the mercy of others—all of their security, all of their sense of belonging, was bound up in the protection of their husbands. Without this, they would have had no status, no rights, no power.

And the judge? Well, the judge sounds has all kinds of status and power, but few principles. He is described as neither fearing God nor respecting people.

Not a great combination.

We don't know anything about the nature of this widow's grievance was, nor do we know who her opponent was. We simply know that she was vulnerable, desperate, and extremely stubborn.

She simply wears down this miserable power-hungry judge, who eventually says:

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."

There is not a hint of human compassion or empathy here, not the slightest inclination that the judge is moved by lofty principles of fairness or right and wrong. This woman is an inconvenience, pure and simple, and he just wants to get rid of her.

Pray like this, Jesus says.

Not because God is like the judge, but because you are like the widow. Vulnerable, poor, desperate.

I don't know about you, but I don't find it easy to pray like this. My prayer can become routine, ritualistic, formal. It can become half-hearted and limp.

Why?

- Too busy? Prayer takes time, after all, and we never seem to have enough of this...
- It doesn't seem to "work?" We pray and we pray for so many things... For healing, for peace in our lives and in our world, for justice for the oppressed, for friends and family members to stop making destructive decisions, for _____. And bad things just keep on happening.
- We have doubts? Perhaps we wonder if God is even listening, if God even *exists!* How many of us have wondered, at times, if our words are just bouncing off the ceiling? I know I have.

Perhaps our culture is uniquely impatient. We expect everything to come to us quickly—we are used to getting what we want when we want it. We are used to information appearing before our eyes at the click of a mouse, to being able to send instant messages around the globe, to the customer always being right, to not wait for *anything*.

Perhaps we apply the same logic to prayer, to God. We expect instant results. We expect to see immediate tangible benefits.

And when we don't see these immediate results, we give up. Or we water our prayers down, fill them with platitudes and nice-sounding words. But inside, we don't really expect much from God.

And yet none of these problems with prayer are unique to us. The Christian tradition is full of examples of saints who have struggled with precisely these things in the life of prayer.

The call to us is the same as it has been down through the ages. Keep praying. Keep persevering.

It's not easy. Persevering is hard work. Pounding on the door of heaven can get exhausting.

Sometimes we wish that Jesus could find easier ways to train us in the life of faith—ways that weren't so demanding and that didn't require so much from us.

Sometimes we would prefer an "instant faith" where believing and doing the right things instantly produced the right virtues, the fruits of the spirit, and magically fixed all of the problems in our lives and in the world.

But this isn't how God works. This has *never* been how God works.

God's ways are slow, and they involve us in the process. And they are worth the wait.

Nothing in the life of faith happens quickly. Redemption is a slow process.

I think that the meaning and the message of this text can be applied beyond the realm of prayer.

Keep going. Keep trying. Even when it's hard, perhaps *especially* when it's hard. We keep engaging in the practices and disciplines that we believe are part of how we are formed as Christians.

Last night, after a full day of lectures and conversation and a memorial service in the evening, I sat down to try to sort out what I wanted to say today and found myself low on energy and low on words.

I opened up my list of blogs that I regularly read and came across a piece that I think fits very well with our text today.

I want to read you a short essay called "Why Go to Church?" by Benjamin Myers, a theology professor from Australia, and host of a blog that I regularly read called *Faith and Theology*.

The piece is about "going to church" but I don't want you to listen to this as a plea or a judgment about people coming (or not coming) to church.

I want you to listen to this essay through the lens of our text about the persistent widow who refuses to relent, who keeps pleading for justice, who keeps banging on the door.

There are people who say that religion is a crutch, and I have never taken offence at that description. There have been times when I've gone to church feeling the need for personal forgiveness or comfort or strength or whatever. But the older I get... the more I feel that my faith is not primarily a personal thing but a way of sharing the common lot with everybody else.

I go to church sometimes not needing comfort for my own private griefs but seeking consolation for the slow unfolding trainwreck that is called human history. I go to church sometimes hoping to find forgiveness not for myself but for my ancestors, my parents, my children and their children who will one day be born and will have to live... in whatever diminished world that I bequeath to them. I go to church sometimes not to be

reconciled to anybody in particular, but because for fifty thousand years the land beneath my feet was home to other peoples, and I am hoping by some miracle to be reconciled to them. I go to church sometimes not seeking peace within my own soul but hoping to find relief from the raging violence that has boiled in the blood of all my brothers since the time of Cain.

I go to church and take bread and wine not necessarily because I feel hungry but because the common human condition is, at bottom, hunger and thirst and nothing more. It is the hunger of my mothers and fathers that I am feeding when I take the consecrated bread. When I take the cup it is the burning thirst of Adam that I slake. It is for the whole huge accumulated mass of human arrogance and stupidity and meanness that I hang my head in shame and say (embarrassed to be asking yet again), Lord have mercy.

I do not go to church because it is enjoyable... or because it is never dull... I do not go to church to satisfy my private needs and wishes. I do not go to church just for myself. I go because of Adam.

Yes, religion is a crutch. But it's not my own personal crutch. It is Adam's crutch. It's the human race that walks (if it walks at all) with an agonising limp.

And so when Sunday morning comes around I drag old Adam out of bed. I make him get dressed and put shoes on his feet. I brush his teeth. I lead him out the door. I force him to go to church.

It's a thankless task, but somebody's got to do it.

I expect that if I keep dragging Adam along to church every Sunday, he might eventually become a Christian. And if he becomes a Christian – who knows? – perhaps in time he will even become that rarest and best of things: a genuine, proper, fully functioning and bona fide human being.¹

¹ <http://www.faith-theology.com/2013/10/why-go-to-church.html>

What I like about this essay is this image of determined persistence. *I keep going... I keep coming... I drag Adam along with me...*

Just like the widow.

One of our other texts from this week's reading is from Genesis and tells the story of Jacob's wrestling with a strange man through the night. In the process, he discovers that he was, in some mysterious way, wrestling with God himself.

His name is changed from "Jacob" to "Israel" which means "to struggle" or "to wrestle."

He walks from the place with a limp, just like Myers describes the human race in his essay.

The common threads that unite Jacob, the widow in Jesus' story, and the essay I just read are *persistence* and *struggle*.

Jacob refuses to let his night visitor go until he blesses him.

The widow refuses to give up the struggle with the judge. She won't let him go until she gets what she knows she needs.

Ben Myers keeps going to church, keeps taking bread and wine... he refuses to let go of God and his Christian brothers and sisters, because he knows that he needs them to become what he was made to become.

Our text from Luke ends with the following question:

And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

A bit of a funny story from last week: After I finished the sermon and sat back down, Nicholas whispered in my ear, "Jesus is hard to find."

It had been a long few days, Naomi was away in Victoria running a half-marathon, I was tired, and didn't have the energy for my son's existential crisis at the moment 😊.

Then, he pointed absently to the kids' crossword puzzle in his lap. "Jesus" is the last word in the list, and I can't find it anywhere 😊.

The phrase stuck with me, though. *Jesus is hard to find*. Yes, it's true, he is. And not just in crossword puzzles. So many people find it hard to believe, hard to commit, hard to trust.

I wonder if Jesus would say something similar to us: "Faith is hard to find."

True faith. The kind of faith that perseveres, that wrestles, that struggles and strains, that refuses to give up, that keeps banging on the door.

I think this is the kind of faith that God is looking for.

So often, we treat faith as an artifact that needs to be preserved throughout our lives. If we can just figure out the right things to believe about God, the right list of do's and don't's, and guard these as carefully as we can throughout our lives, God will be pleased with us.

But I don't think this is the kind of faith Jesus is looking for. I think Jesus is looking for people who aren't afraid to struggle, to wrestle, to keep pounding on the door for justice and blessing, just like that widow, just like Jacob in the book of Genesis.

Jesus is looking for a faith that is honest and persistent and determined.

This is the kind of faith that the Son of Man hopes to find on the earth.

So we arrive back where we began the sermon today.

Pray always. Don't lose heart.

Keep going. Even when it's hard. Even when the way doesn't seem clear. Even when you're sick to death of it. Even when you're bored or listless, even when life seems to be a series of unrelenting burdens. Even when God seems silent. Even when justice is nowhere in sight.

Keep going. There is light at the end and along the way.

The life of prayer and the life of faith in general is a marathon, not a sprint.

Keep praying, keep wrestling, keep asking, longing, hoping, loving, trusting.... Keep banging on the door.

Don't stop.

For Christ's sake.

Amen.