

Sermon: It Happens All the Time

Year C, Proper 24

[Jeremiah 31:27-34](#); [Psalm 119:97-104](#); [2 Timothy 3:14-4:5](#); [Luke 18:1 to 8](#)

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In my corporate career, I had to do a lot of interviewing. Because I often worked in internet startups, the candidates were often fresh out of college. After a bit of conversation, I would ask them to tell me about a time where they knew they were right and they stuck to their guns.

Don't say anything, but think for a minute, what would you say if I asked you to tell me about a time when you knew you were right and you stuck to your guns? [Pause].

The candidates usually thought I was asking for their "hero" story. What I was actually listening for was their ability to be specific and concrete. I wanted to know if they could turn a conviction that they were right into observable, discrete action. They wouldn't have had much experience. What I needed to get a feel for is what they would look like in action. I never had any trouble getting an answer. If anything, I had trouble getting them to stop talking.

My second question usually led to complete silence. I asked them to tell me about a time when they knew they were right and they gave in. How would you answer the question? [Pause].

For most people, their immediate reaction is to say that when you know you're right, you're not going to give in. But I think we do that all the time. We do it with our parents, our spouses, our children. We do it with the people we work with. We do it with the people we worship with. Sometimes it's because we can see that we're all going to end up in the same place. They want to go left around and you want to go right around, but in the end we'll end up in the same spot. Sometimes it's because you know them well enough to know that they aren't going to learn except by doing it their way and having to retrench when their way doesn't work. The quickest way to get everyone the same page is just to let the learning happen. Sometimes we let go because it's not worth the fight. Sometimes we let go because harmony within the relationship is more valuable than being right.

In today's reading from Luke we have Jesus helping the disciples to understand about praying always and not losing heart. Giving in, giving up is not an option, no matter what. Jesus teaches the lesson through a parable. But think for a minute about what we know of Jesus' own life. He prays all the time. He prays at his baptism (Luke 3:21), in the wilderness (Luke 5:16), on the Mount of Olives before his betrayal (Luke 22:41, 44), on the cross (Luke 23:34). During his lifetime he is transfigured with heavenly glory (Luke 9:29). Through prayer he endures the agony of his own death (Luke 23:43).¹ He could have offered examples of the transformative power of prayer from his own life, moments that the disciples themselves had shared and been transformed by. But instead he tells a parable.

Last week, we read Jesus' parable about healing 10 lepers. They said to him, "have mercy upon us." and he healed them. Wouldn't that be a better way of explaining why we should persist in prayer? You wouldn't have to take it literally. Prayer can heal not only by easing our physical maladies but by smoothing out the broken places in our souls. But Jesus doesn't tell that parable. He tells this one about an unjust judge and a widow.

¹Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Luke 18:1-8." Interpretation 56, no. 3 (2002): 319.

We know almost nothing about them. The judge is probably a Roman judge, because the Jewish judges usually sat in panels of three.² If that was the case, they were notoriously corrupt, having to be bribed just to get a judgment, let alone a favorable one.³ If a woman was a widow and advocating for herself, that meant she had no men to speak for her, to protect her. We don't know what happened to her, although given how the Bible talks about widows, it was probably some kind of economic crime that took away her livelihood or earthly possessions. We should understand her role as someone who needs justice to prevail simply so she can go on living.⁴

The widow has no earthly reason to believe this is going to turn out well. The only thing she can bring to bear is persistence, never giving up and never giving in. And this corrupt judge does the right thing. When Jesus compares God to such an unjust judge, Jesus is not saying that we need to nag God into giving us what we want. Jesus is pointing out that if even an unjust judge can do the right thing, how much more will God do for us?

Notice this though. Jesus is trying to enlighten his disciples about praying always. So his example must point to something that is going on all the time. Unjust judges doing the right thing doesn't happen all the time. It's unusual, ok, it's unheard of, for them to do that. What is normal, what happens all the time, is injustice. The people who need justice to prevail simply so they can go on living are not the ones who get justice. *That* is what happens all the time.

There's a two layered lesson going on here. First, injustice is the norm in this world. By explaining that God will do so much more than an unjust judge, Jesus is saying that God's work in this world is justice. It may not come immediately, but it will come. God will not allow injustice to prevail for all time and in all places. Justice is the name for God's action in this world.⁵

And the second layer of the lesson? If justice is God's work in this world, prayer is how we collaborate in that act of God.⁶ Certainly think of prayer as centering ourselves as we sit in the pews on Sunday morning. But think of prayer as what we do because we cannot separate who God is and what God does from who we are and what we are called to do.⁷ Prayer is what results when, like Timothy, we follow sound doctrine (2 Timothy 4:3), which is not some fossilized set of rules laid down centuries ago, but "what the church must teach to be the authentic church now."⁸ Prayer is what we do in this world to let every generation which faces the injustice that runs rampant in the world know that God will not let that be the final world. We share that vision of injustice not being the final answer, just as Timothy did, by teaching, reproofing, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). And that is prayer as well.

Prayer, in all its forms, *is* persistence.⁹ It replaces the human reality of being right and digging in or being right and giving in, with true reality that we can collaborate with God so that all of humanity can see justice in this world. Of course Jesus tells us to pray always without losing

²William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975: 222.

³Barclay, 222.

⁴Weaver, 318.

⁵Weaver, 319.

⁶Weaver, 319.

⁷ Margit Ernst-Habib, "Proper 24, Theological Perspective, Luke 18:1-8" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 188.

⁸Philip E. Thompson, "2 Timothy 4:1-5." Interpretation 56, no. 4 (2002): 422.

⁹Weaver, 319.

heart. Because injustice in this world will not stand and we have a part in sharing that message. When Jesus comes again, he will find faith on earth, so long as we are still proclaiming that truth, so long as we are still praying.