

October 17, 2010

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

Sermon: "Blessed to be a Blessing: Lifting Up the Next Generation"

This sermon should have been simple to write. Jesus tells us what the passage is all about in the very first line: the need to pray always and to not lose heart." But I found myself saying, "Yeah, but..." Yeah, but...we live in a crazy world where 2 plus 2 doesn't always equal 4, yeah, but...things happen and we found ourselves asking, "Why did God let this happen?" or even find ourselves asking, "Where was God in all of this". it seems, especially more these days, that things just don't make sense. There is so much anger in this world. There is so much violence in this world. There is so much hurt in this world.

Nowadays, it seems like no can agree to disagree and still come to the table in fellowship and love. Nowadays, it seems like, if people disagree with each other, they automatically write each other off as not important, or see each other as less than a human being. Nowadays, it seems like, even our children have picked up our bad behaviors and have forgotten how to be kind to one another. Nowadays, we have to admit that it is hard not to lose faith we are faced with a world that is illogical, broken, and hurting. Nowadays, we want answers to our questions that give us strength, that give us courage, that inspire us to go forward.

If we are really honest with ourselves, when we hear this passage from Luke, what we really want to say is Jesus, in spite of all we just said about our world being broken, about how our world is hurting, about how even our children are taking their anger and hurt out on each other, about how we are struggling to keep it together, Jesus all you can say to us when we ask why these things are happening to us is to: "Pray always and not lose heart." Jesus, that's easier said than done. Jesus, that seems like a pat answer and really doesn't answer our questions of Why? Jesus, that really doesn't help us that much when we are faced with a world that is broken and hurting each and every day. What do you mean "pray always and not lose heart?" How is that going to help us out? Where is the Good News in that?

Jesus responds to our questions by sharing with his disciples and us sitting in the pews today the parable of the unjust judge and the widow, a story that is about a judge who doesn't really fear anything and has no respect for God or for his fellow human beings, story about a woman who had lost everything, who had no one to speak for her, who instead of giving up, relentlessly, tirelessly, passionately, day after day, demanded to be heard, demanded justice, demanded wholeness.

A story, we realize as Jesus is telling it to us that becomes an invitation for us to open our minds and our hearts to a new way, to the Kingdom way, a story that reminds us of the promises and character of God that we have experienced in our lives each and every day. A story, we realize as Jesus is telling it to us that shows us how to be faithful in all things. A story, we realize as Jesus is telling it to us, that reminds us that there is our time and then there is God's time. A story, we realize as Jesus is telling it to us that gives us hope. A story that is about how we respond as people of faith, as people of hope, as people of prayer, when it all seems to be closing in on us. A story that is about the unwavering and unlimited love that God has for all of God's children.

So I invite us to take a look at this text of good news of hope and of prayer and hear God's word for us that will continue to sustain us on our journeys of faith once more. As we know, at this point in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, giving his disciples some last minute instructions. He has told the disciples that God's Kingdom is here, but the disciples are looking around, thinking to themselves, "Is this all that there is? Surely, this isn't God's Kingdom. People are still hurting. People are still oppressed. People are still seeking justice."

"Jesus has told the disciples to pray "Thy Kingdom come" but [the disciples] have grown weary and are losing heart." Jesus has told his disciples that he is here to proclaim the Good News for all of God's people but the disciples are looking around and wondering if Jesus' message is really getting through. They are beginning to wonder and question if they made the right call to follow him. They are beginning to wonder if they made the right decision and to be honest, they are tired. Nothing seems to be going their way. The powers that be are angry at them. The people just want a piece of Jesus, the piece that fits their own needs. The people really don't want to listen to everything that Jesus is saying. They have traveled for so many miles and for what? No recognition. No fame. No big money prizes. The disciples are tired and they are beginning to lose faith.

They thought that when Jesus came along as the Messiah, things would change. Things would fall into place. Things would be different but now it just seems like more of the same: bad things happen to good people, good things happening to bad people. It doesn't seem like God is getting around to God's Kingdom real quick, and they are weary. They want to know when, where, what, why, and how about God's Kingdom. And they want to know now. They want answers before they take one more step farther on this journey with Jesus.

So Jesus tells them this parable and invites them to think in a new way. He tells them about this judge who didn't care for anything or anyone, who finally gives this widow justice, not because he was moved by this woman's passion, not because the judge finally felt compassion for this widow, not because this judge remembered his duty to take care of the least of these. No the judge finally gives this widow justice because she had worn him down. He gives her justice because she kept bothering him. In fact, the text actually translates that he gave her justice because she was giving him a black eye or more roughly translated: "so that she may not finally come and slap him in the face."

The judge finally relented and gave this widow justice for his own protection. He was looking out for his own needs. He knew that this woman would be making a scene each and every day. People were beginning to talk. People were beginning to whisper behind his back. The judge finally gave this widow justice because he wanted to protect his reputation and his well-being. He was actually afraid of this widow. And that is the irony of the whole parable.

One of the most powerful men in society at that time was afraid of the least powerful person in society at that time, the one with all the power finally relented to the powerless because he was afraid and worn down by her. That's why he gave her justice.

So by telling this parable, Jesus flips this around on us and asks us how much more will God, who is compassionate, slow to anger, loving, merciful, who is so opposite from the character of

the judge in the parable do for God's people. The God who has known us from our births, the God who has watched over us all of our days, the God that only wants good things for God's things. How much more will God do for God's people?

God is going to give us justice, give us grace, bring about God's Kingdom for all of God's children, not because we have worn God down but because God wants that for all of God's children already. That is what God has promised us. That is what God has already planned out for God's children. Wholeness, justice, grace: these things are what God intended for all of God's children from the very beginning.

by telling the disciples this parable, Jesus changes things and invites the disciples to think about God's Kingdom and God in a new way. Instead of asking why, when, and how about God's Kingdom, they really should be asking do they have what it takes to be faithful until the end? They already have the promises that God will have the last word. They have already experienced God's grace and God's love in their lives. They have already experienced God's mercy in their lives. They already know that God's justice will roll down like waters and wash everything clean because that is what God wants: a people, a creation, united, connected, whole, and healed. That's what matters. These things are the keys to God's Kingdom.

So instead the questions that the disciples should be asking is do they have what it takes to remain faithful through it all? They don't need to worry about when or why when it comes to God's Kingdom. God is in control. God is in the process. They already know that God is working in the world. What their challenge and what our challenge is as disciples as well, that in spite of this illogical, broken world, is do we have what it takes to remain faithful as a person of faith, as a person of hope, as a child of God.

All we and the disciples have to worry about and work toward is challenging ourselves to remain faithful through it all, even if that faith is as small as a mustard seed. Jesus has already said that even that small amount is enough to sustain us, to encourage us, to renew us to become the people that God created us to be. it is enough give us hope.

The Good News is that Jesus is once again challenging his disciples and us today to think about faith in a new way. He is challenging us to realize that "faith doesn't fix things as much as it gives [us] the capacity and courage to bear the unbearable," to continue the journey, the knowledge that we are surrounded by God's love and God's grace as we go, and the ability to trust that God is in control.

All the disciples and we as people of God need to do is to have a "tenacious hopeful and hope-filled faith in the midst of our present ordeal" and to do that the good news is that all we have to do is pray always and not lose heart. Because today Jesus reminds us is that "prayer [is] not a last resort when all the plans, and programs, and power plays [have] failed; prayer [is] the first and primary task of Christians."

The challenge is not to think of prayer as a "to-do list for God". Prayer is not telling God how God should or should not act in our lives. Prayer is not confining God to what we think is the right thing to do in difficult situations.

Rather prayer is a way of relationship with God and with all of God's children that guides us, molds us, that reminds us of our true calling and that is to love our God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our strength and to love our neighbors as our selves. Prayer is more than us telling God how to act and what to do. As a people of faith, as children of God, prayer becomes a way to show all of us "attitudes, habits, and practices that must be ingrained into our every waking moment.

Prayer becomes the way that we are strengthen, and encouraged for the journey. Prayer becomes the way that reminds us that our journeys of faith are marathons, not sprints. Prayer becomes the way that reminds that we are not alone, that we are a part of something that is more than me and my relationship with God. Prayer becomes the way that we open ourselves to God's calling and are renewed for the journey so that we can go out each and every day, as God's people, as God's agents of change, as God's hands and heart in this world. Prayer becomes the way we hear and experience God's will, God's plan, and God's leading in our lives.

"prayer [becomes a way, a mind set, a way of faith that] refuses to believe that the way things are has to be the way they will always be, [that imagines] how the world could be, [that gains] the wisdom and the energy to bring it about." Prayer becomes one of the ways that we become the people that God created us to be.

So when the world asks us when and why about God's Kingdom, we are called to share the good news that the real question we as people of faith, as children of God should be asking is do we have what it takes to remain faithful always and in all things. And the answer is yes, that in spite of what this crazy, illogical world throws our way, we can claim today that God is still working in our world, that God is in control, that we will remain faithful until the until because through God all things are possible. Hear the Good News: pray always and don't lose heart.

May we always remember these words as we continue along our journeys of faith. Amen.