

Pentecost 19C 16 October 2022
Luke 18:1-8
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from our gracious and merciful God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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

- Every day, immigrants, both legal and illegal, come to this country seeking a new and better life. I'm ashamed to say that they're often greeted by words or actions that say, "You don't belong here. I don't want to see or hear from you. You're not welcome 'round here."
- In 2020, 381 young Australians took their own lives. 99 of those were aged between 5 and 17. 5-year-olds!
- Throughout the world the poor struggle to survive another day of inadequate food, clothing, shelter, water, medicine, or work. Too many struggle with drug addiction and/or alcoholism.
- Many women live in fear of their husband's anger and violence. On average, one woman per week is killed by her husband's rage and many more are joining the ranks of homelessness.
- I recently came across a group of parents and adults who meet to share and talk through the overwhelming grief they suffer following the death of a baby or inability to bear children.

These are just a few of the widows in Jesus' parable. Their souls cry out, praying for and demanding a new life. They hope things will change. They seek something different for their life, something other than what they have right now. Day after day it's the same, nothing changes. It's not right. They know it, we know it, and God knows it. They live and some have died, standing before the unjust judge.

The unjust judge is a cleverly camouflaged chameleon with many subtle, yet, poisonous disguises: prejudice, hatred, fear, religious intolerance, the disease that won't be healed, economic systems, grief, addiction. Regardless of the disguise, the unjust judge neither fears God nor respects people.

When you stand before the unjust judge, life seems monstrous, powerful, and overwhelming. You feel small, powerless, and alone. There's no one to defend or represent you. You stand by yourself unsure what to believe about life or yourself – like Elijah hiding in the cave at Mt Horeb declaring, "I alone am left" (1 Kings 19:10). No matter what you do or say, all seems lost, nothing changes, nothing works. You don't know what else to do so, like the widow in Jesus' parable, day after day you cry out. That's the widow's story in today's parable, in today's world, even in our own lives. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever stood before the unjust judge?

What do we do when we stand before the unjust judge? What do we do when we see our neighbour standing before the unjust judge? My inclination is to get angry and fight back. But that only leads to me becoming as hardened and unjust as the judge himself. Some will give up and believe what the unjust judge says: "Suck it up! Life doesn't get any better." Others will blame and accuse God of being the unjust judge. However, a few will discover the widow's faith.

"Pray always and don't lose heart," says Jesus. That's the widow's faith. Day after day she shows up. Day after day she recounts the injustice done to her. Day after day she presents her pain to the judge, the world, and God. Day after day she cries out. "Pray always and don't lose heart."

To pray always doesn't mean giving God a to do list and then sitting back expecting God to fix everything. To pray always means that we cry out to God and then we do whatever we can to bring about the change we seek, trusting that God is already doing what God needs to do. We don't give up; we don't lose heart. Maybe that means we seek counselling or a support group. We feed the hungry. We offer compassion to the grieving. We speak and teach against hatred and prejudice, respecting the dignity of every human being. We strive for justice and peace. It means that we don't just make our case before God, but with God. We join God in answering our prayer.

Some believe that prayer is about persuading or wearing down God, so that God will do what we ask. “The squeaky wheel gets the oil” type of thinking. It operates with the belief that God is far off in the distance, out there somewhere and not here, that God is either unaware or uncaring about us and this world. So, we have to persuade God to show up and act. That only happens if we’re good enough, believe the right things, and say the right words enough times.

That’s not what it means to pray always. If that’s what we’ve been taught or come to believe, then this parable challenges us to rethink our views. Jesus rejects that understanding of the relationship between God and his people. God is *nothing* like the unjust judge. God sees our suffering. God hears our cries. God quickly grants justice. “How quickly?” is always the question on our lips. We’re impatient like the prophet, Habakkuk: ‘How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?’ [1:2] (See also Psalm 13:1; 13:2; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84; Habakkuk 2:6; Zechariah 1:12; Revelation 6:10).

Faith always involves waiting. It involves patience. How long? When will things change? When will God speak or act? Saints, I don’t know. What I do know is that waiting doesn’t mean God is absent. Waiting doesn’t mean God is uncaring. Waiting doesn’t mean God isn’t already on the move. You see, the widow isn’t waiting for God. She’s waiting with God. Praying always, keeps her from losing heart. It keeps her showing up day after day trusting that God sees, hears, and acts.

If you’d like a hope-filled, practical, real-time acceptance of this, I’d encourage you to set aside some time and talk to Colleen about her decades long, marathon prayer vigil for Kingsley and her family. Like the widow, Colleen keeps turning up day after day, trusting that God is near, trusting that God hears her, trusting that God is in control, and she thanks him for the miracles and blessings that have kept Kingsley with her for so long, against seemingly impossible odds. I’m humbled to witness the faith that has seen Kingsley and Brittany married for 5 years now. ‘O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him’ (Psalm 34:8).

To pray always is what keeps us, in thought, word, and deed, present to and in relationship with God so that when God does act, we'll still be there. Imagine the tragedy if one day the widow gave up. If she just couldn't stand another day of crying out, pointing to the injustice of her life, presenting her pain for everyone to see. What then? Well, she didn't give up and that was the day the judge ruled; that was the day life changed. I wonder how much of God's life, love, compassion, forgiveness, healing we've missed because we didn't show up or failed to hang in there. To pray always is what ensures we're present so that when the Son of Man comes, he will find faith on earth. He will find us, the widows of the world who refused to let the unjust judge have the final say.

To live the widow's faith requires persistence in crying out to God, day and night, never giving up, trusting that he hears and, listening when he speaks. Pray always and don't lose heart, Saints. Jesus isn't asking us to do what we can't do. He's not asking us to go where he hasn't already been. Jesus has lived the widow's faith. He has suffered all injustice, and yet, he is triumphant. And Jesus has given us his life and faith. It's already deep within our souls, and Jesus is nearby. You already have all that you need to face the unjust judge of this world. You have the faith that united you with Jesus at your baptism; the faith that Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament; the faith through which Father God justifies his chosen children. So go and live like the widows God knows you to be, Saints. Hang in there. Pray always and don't lose heart. Jesus hears your cry and he's on the move. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.