

Luke 18:1-8
October 16, 2016

“Persistent Faith”

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If there is anything we know it's this: when Jesus tells a parable, look out. Jesus had a wonderful way of using parables to invite his listeners into deeper truths. Truths which lie underneath the apparent “moral of the story.”

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Krause from Eden Seminary reminds us, “scholars are in wide agreement that Jesus’ parables were multi-dimensional, and multi-faceted teaching tools that do more to challenge and dismantle our assumptions about ‘the moral of the story’ or the meaning of life, than they serve to provide it.”

Dr. John Dominic Crossan says Jesus’ parables are “World Shattering stories that seek to disorient and disarm our grip on the world so that a vision of the Kingdom of God can gleam through.”

Today we have a parable of a tenacious widow who pleads her case continually to a callous judge. She seeks vindication against an adversary. For a time, the judge refuses her, but ultimately because he did not want to face her continual pleading, he relented and vindicated her. On the surface this seems to be a story about how the followers of Jesus need to persist in prayer like the widow. Have faith like the widow, be the “little engine that could.” But the implications of this lead to difficulty.

If this widow is a symbol of persistent faith it is natural to conclude the unjust judge is playing the role of God. But, how likely is it Jesus would describe his Father in heaven as an “unjust judge?” It just calls for a closer look.

On second look we might wonder why Jesus instructs his followers to “Hear what the unjust judge has to say?” Who is Jesus really inviting us to identify with? Might this be a lesson to his listeners who already have a track record of not caring about Justice?

I hate to say it; but I think Jesus is trying to get us to identify with the callous judge. Twice the judge is described as one who neither fears God nor regards humans. I think Jesus wants his listeners to take notice of this.

This two-step description seems in direct contrast to another two step description, Jesus’ greatest commandment, “we are to love God with all your heart and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” For Jesus love of God and neighbor is the center of vibrant faith. This unjust judge, rather than being alive to God and humans, he lives his life following the path of least resistance. When this widow pleads, he does not see a sister in the Spirit of God, but rather a drain on his energy and time.

If you are bold enough to still be following the news these days; it is clear that issues related to women have surfaced. That's not to say men are unimportant, or the issues that relate to both men and women are unimportant, but it is clear issues related to women have surfaced: violent assault on college campuses, women's rights, how men view and treat women, family leave, equal pay and more. Look up and down the national and statewide tickets for any party, issues related to women have surfaced.

Today Jesus holds up for us an example of a faithful woman. One engaged in the struggle against injustice with determination, energy and hope. One who knows who she is—a child of God—and is confident that God's justice will prevail. The judge on the other hand, who seems to have authority – does not know his authority comes from God. I thought today's parable provides us an opportunity to take a closer look at how we in the United Church of Christ, and here at Emanuel church, have sought to exercise the relentless faith of the widow.

Every month at Emanuel we conduct a Fair Trade sale and among the products we offer are bean soup mixes from the Women's Bean Project. The mission of the Women's Bean Project is to change women's lives by providing stepping stones to self-sufficiency. Women's Bean Project employs chronically unemployed and impoverished women through transitional employment and helps them earn the job readiness, interpersonal and life skills to create a new future - for themselves, their families, our community and our economy.

Secondly, many years our congregation has supported the Sojourner Family Peace Center here in Milwaukee. SFPC is the largest nonprofit provider of domestic violence prevention and intervention services in Wisconsin, serving over 9,500 clients each year. Sojourner provides an array of support aimed at helping families affected by domestic violence achieve safety, justice and well-being.

This year Emanuel's mission committee approved a grant to support a Christian agency which works with pregnant and unprepared young women right here in our own community. They help to provide access to resources the women need in a time of crises.

And most of you have heard me say it a million times. Emanuel Church in its earliest days saw the full humanity of Women when our ancestors granted women a vote in all Church affairs 25 years before our nation allowed women to vote in Political elections.

In the United Church of Christ as a whole, our movements have been examples of this widow's persistent faith. In 1773, a member of Old South Congregational church, Phillis Wheatley, became the first published African American Author. Her book was called "Poems on Various Subjects." She gained her freedom from slavery soon after, and much later, Alice Walker wrote of her, "She kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song."

Then, Sept. 15, 1853, 153 years ago, a woman named Antoinette Brown, age 28, was ordained in a small Congregational Church in South Butler, N.Y. Rev. Brown received her

theological education at Oberlin College in Ohio, the first college to affirm coeducation. She was a well-known lecturer on temperance and the abolition of slavery.

Ecdysis is the scientific term for the act of a snake shedding their skin. They do this to get rid of parasites that have attached to them. Jesus in this parable invites us to shed the characteristics of the Unjust Judge; the parasites of cynicism, dismay and lost-ness; Jesus calls us to live dynamic, persistent faith in God; trusting God's love and justice are at work in ways we may not even see, and they will prevail.

Both here at Emanuel and in the United Church of Christ, we have been a church trusting a God who calls all people, women and men, into relationships of care, compassion and justice with one another.

So let's continue to practice the faith of this widow, not the faithlessness of the callous judge. Let's keep on keeping on! With hearts open and hands unclenched, there is an answer to Jesus' question – "will the Son of man find faith on earth?"

It is "yes Lord, yes!"

Amen