

A Service for UCW Gathering

By Deb Bowman

Prayer candles: Please feel welcome to come up and light a candle at any time during the service – prayers for joy, hope, sorrow, remembrance, repentance...

OUR APPROACH

PRELUDE

LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

We light the Christ candle to be reminded that wherever we are, in our bodies, minds and hearts, there God is also. Thanks be to God

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

(Ministry Matters, Oct. 16, 2016 adapted)

One: As the rains pour from heaven,
soaking the earth that it may produce good things....

**All: So God pours love upon us,
that we, too, may produce goodness and peace.**

One: We have been blessed with many gifts and talents.
Today we are blessed with the presence of each other, sisters in faith.

All: God desires that we use these gifts and talents for healing, peace, and hope.

One: Come, let us worship and celebrate the love and power of God, and the strength of women united.

All: Let us be persistent in our prayers and our living. AMEN.

***HYMN: Called by Earth and Sky**

MV 135

*PRAYER

(Lectionary Liturgies, Oct. 10, 2010, Thom Shuman adapted)

Holy Word: ever clear,
you keep us from wandering down
the wrong paths;
ever longed for,
you make us persistent
in bringing justice to the lost and to the least;
ever practical, you show us how
not to misplace our hearts.
Gather us in; fill us with your holy impatience
and your sacred nagging that your will,

will be done.
In Jesus' name,
Amen

***PASSING THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

RESPONSE: Dance with the Spirit

MV 156

Jim Strathdee, words and music
(sung as we return to our seats)

**Dance with the Spirit early in the mornin',
walk with the Spirit throughout the long day.
Work and hope for the new life abornin',
listen to the Spirit to show you the way.**

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING:

Luke 18: 1-8

One: This is a story of our faith.

All: Thanks be to God!

***HYMN: Bring Many Names**

VU 268

SERMON

SILENT TIME FOR REFLECTION

HYMN: When a Poor One

VU 703

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

(ask people gathered what and who they would like to pray for; prayers of thanksgiving and asking for help)

JESUS' PRAYER

**Our Loving God in heaven,
Holy is your name; your kingdom come,
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory
forever and ever. AMEN**

***HYMN: Let All Things Now Living**

VU 242

***COMMISSIONING & BENEDICTION**

“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” (Luke 18: 1) If you’ve learned nothing else from hearing me preach over the last ten plus years, and I know it’s entirely possible that one could learn very little from my preaching, I do hope you’ve learned that when you hear a parable is coming up you need to brace yourself for hearing something that isn’t going to make much sense. The good news of the gospel parables is that for once it’s OK that we don’t understand what the Bible is saying. Parables lead us down what looks initially like a domesticated garden path until suddenly we find ourselves lost in a complex corn maze. While they offer us a window into the world as God intends it, that window can be more like a fun house mirror that distorts images and confuses our eyes. So, if on first hearing a parable we think it makes perfect sense, we’ve not yet understood it.

Luke starts leading us astray immediately with his introductory sentence: “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart.” Initially this seems easy enough; certainly when our prayers are ones of gratitude, then we can trust that they always hit the mark and are never ‘wasted’. But even as I typed that I realized that that isn’t as simple as it sounds either. The kinds of prayers that are offered in abundance for example on Thanksgiving weekend, are ones that surely sounded sweet to God’s ears. Prayers of gratitude for the goodness that we enjoy, for the pleasure of family and homes and for our ability to savour it all. But then, I got thinking about other prayers of gratitude. About football players pointing up to the heavens when they get a sack or a touchdown. About the prosperity gospel type of prayers that spring from believing that God wants us all to be rich and we just thank Jesus that we earned an obscene amount of money last year and isn’t it great that it’s God’s will that we get rich while our employees just eek out an existence.

God is not some wish dispensing machine that drops our deepest desires into the tray at the bottom of the machine. No one knows this better than most of you – people who have struggled through illness and aging, who have lost friends and families to debilitating diseases, who pray fervently for your children on the street and strangers continents away, but who do not experience an obvious and immediate response to those prayers. So really, Luke, this parable isn’t about the need to be persistent in prayer in order that we finally get our way. Because that just doesn’t work, there’s a big credibility gap in that promise.

Luke goes on to tell the story about a judge in a certain city “...who neither feared God nor had respect for people.” And there was a widow who kept coming to see this judge, and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” In our time, this wouldn’t seem like such an unlikely scenario. Recognizing that there are some good and righteous judges amongst us, let’s take a step back and

place this unjust judge in his historical context. He represents an implacable bureaucratic system that was certainly not set up to serve the Everyman, and he and the system held an enormous amount of power and influence. For a widow in Jesus' time to go forth from her house, if she had one, and to approach someone of that stature and to demand from that august person that her rights be fulfilled, that she even imagined she had any rights, well that wouldn't have made any sense to Jesus' hearers, at all. Widows were on the absolute margins of society; they had no husband, no inheritance, no social standing. They had nothing. And yet this particular widow seemed to think she had every right to make demands on the judge, on the 'system'. That would have turned things upside down for those gathered around listening to Jesus. This narrative window into the realm of God would have revealed a place where the poorest, weakest, most marginal of all the population had rights, and voice and power. It's as weird as the beatitude, 'blessed are the weak, for they shall inherit the earth'.

The judge finally relents, "I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." Other translations read, "so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face."! That image would have been completely over the top of nonsensical to Jesus' audience. Things would end very badly for that level of uppity.

So, writes Luke, quoting Jesus, "Listen to what the unjust judge says, and will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay in helping them?" We're supposed to think that, if even a corrupt judge will respond to a worthless widow, imagine then how much bigger and better and quicker a good God would respond to his people.

But that's too easy. Maybe in Jesus' time this came as a shock. That a no account widow could demand justice from the powers that be was such an incongruent thought, such an unheard of possibility that indeed it did reveal to Jesus's hearers the radical nature of the kingdom of God. That in God's place and time the meek would indeed inherit the earth, the voiceless would be heard and the powerful called to account, would turn people's expectations upside down. But in our time, the interpretation of this parable has lost its power. We've domesticated it, it's too facile – pray always and things will turn out. It has been used in a way that obscenely diminishes the beauty of prayer, by anyone raising their fingers to the heavens or saying that their ridiculous wealth is God's gift for exploitive business practices. And it is a travesty to suggest to broken-hearted people, to those depressed or grieving or held in the grips of addictions or struggling to recover from illnesses, or un or underemployed, that if they just prayed hard enough everything would work out. And besides, when we slip into imagining God as the unjust judge (which isn't what Luke is saying but it's easy to go there) then that just doesn't make sense either. As if the God of all creation and in all creation sits on a dais some distant place and weighs whether or not to answer our prayers. As if she flips through some kind of cosmic Day Timer or Google calendar trying to decide if she has time for us today. Or

not.

And then I had an idea. What if, for our time, God is the widow? And life is the unjust judge? How many times do we bemoan the unfair turns that life takes, the random, horrible things that happen? Cataclysmic earthquakes and monstrous monsoons, and decimating viruses are part of life. Greedy warlords and abominable despots are part of life, and sometimes feel uncomfortably near by. Cancer and addictions and random street violence are part of life. Life, as the capricious unjust judge of the story, is not such a far-fetched idea. The author of Ecclesiastes believed that life is indeed just like that, erratic and uncaring and unfair, and the writings were about how to live in the midst of it.

And what if God is the widow? Our historical image of God is as an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present distant force. But more currently we have been exploring and embracing a God that is a verb, that is a force of love, a lure towards goodness. And, a God who is fully self-emptying, giving everything over to make room for creation and all the creatures and inanimate things that make up the world we know. God as powerless, as self-emptied, as the widow with no capacity for coercion or force but only capable of doing what love can do? God as the persistent widow, hassling life, worrying away at it, nipping life at its heels. God through love as the persistent widow compelling the arc of life's history to bend towards justice and goodness. This is more like what we have experienced of God in our lives – that struggles and sorrows are not magically lifted off us but are instead transformed and reshaped even as we are transformed and reshaped through the experience. That God persistently pulls hope and resurrection from the wreckage of our lives, that in God the pendulum swings in the direction of healing and reconciliation.

This is the God of Ecclesiastes, demanding justice through time: "...it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it;...That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by." (Ecclesiastes 3: 2,4,5) God seeks out justice and compassion; mending, redeeming, working even through the history of life, to bend life towards a realm of compassion and justice, to the fulfillment of God's yearnings for creation.

And our prayers are indeed part of that persistent seeking, mending, redeeming. Both our prayers raised in silent solitude, and those prayers that are communal prayers of active engagement. Praying with our bodies as we shelter the refugee and feed the hungry, as we build space for community to gather, and offer sanctuary from life's buffeting injustice. Persistence in prayer is not a passive hopefulness but a combining of our hearts and will and capability with the sacred persistence of the widow. We're in this together, us, and the love that is God. And that persistent, nasty nagging widow's will, will be done, in time. Thanks be to God. Amen