"Faith doesn't fix things. It gives people the capacity and courage to bear the unbearable." (Peter Woods, pastor and therapist, South Africa)


Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. He said, “There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: ‘My rights are being violated. Protect me!’

“He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, ‘I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won’t quit badgering me, I’d better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I’m going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.’”

Then the Master said, “Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won’t step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won’t he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?”

**Sermon**

We woke up this past Thursday able to breathe a little sigh of relief. Our federal government has gone back to work. But you would have to have taken a complete sabbatical from the media to avoid seeing and hearing how much money the economy has lost because of the shut down and sequestration. And right behind that bit of news is the reminder that this fix is only temporary. Early next year we'll have to deal with the issues all over again.

To those who were affected directly: you have our sympathy. For the rest of us there's a nagging feeling that there is no solution to this government standoff and we'll just keep lurching along, stop/start, stop/start.

This is challenging enough, but when added on to all the crises and uncertainties closer to home, it increases the anxiety and suffering we experience.

Just knowing you as I do, I can imagine some of you could be suffering from lack of sleep because of a sick child whose crying keeps you up at night. Sure, you can take her to the doctor and find out what's wrong and give her something to soothe her, but all that takes time out of an already packed schedule.
You could be grappling with a legal situation that requires an expensive remedy. Spending money you didn't budget can disturb anyone's peace. Most legal matters can be settled in court, if not out of court, if we don't run out of money first.

But the widow in Jesus' parable lived at a time when women didn't have access to courts directly no matter how much money they had. They operated in a universe parallel to men's. A universe in which without a man -- a woman was essentially invisible. A widow would have had little or hope of a fair hearing, if she could find her voice.

It's not obvious to us, but this whole parable Jesus tells in Luke gospel is really kind of a joke; an absurd irony. It would have brought a chuckle to those who heard it first. To speak to a man like the judge, a widow had to have to be crazy. Or insanely courageous.

Jesus pits this fearless widow (with her unspecified complaint) against an equally fearless judge, one who has no incentive to do the right thing. It's a dog fight of unequal proportion, the stuff of an I Love Lucy sitcom. Yet the woman's relentless cries eventually do win out. In the original translation it says the judge gave in because he feared that if he didn't give her what she wanted he'd be slapped in the face and end up with a black eye.

This story reminds me of the time my mother took me with her to return a pair of shoes that had torn at the seam after just a few wearings. The shoes had been purchased on final clearance. So neither the salesman nor the store manager had any intention of giving my mother her money back, or letting her exchange the shoes for something of equal value. But my mother was so obnoxiously, stridently, embarrassingly persistent, threatening to smear their reputation all over town, that they not only gave her a new pair of shoes, but they let her have two more pairs (one for me!) and then escorted us apologetically, all the way to the door.

If a harried shoe salesman will break rules and throw in several more pairs of shoes in the bargain, how much more generous would a loving God be?

Jesus says this parable is not about injustice, but about prayer and the need to pray always, without losing heart. But we know that prayer is not always answered immediately. Nor in the way we have asked.

I had very loving parents growing up, but they didn't always give me the things I asked for. At least not in the way I asked for them. For Christmas when I was about eight or nine years old I asked for a "bride doll". Specifically, I wanted the one my friend Sandra Kuper had, one that came from the doll store in the Palm Center shopping mall.

What I got was clearly a cheap knock off. She didn't have the same strapless bridal gown. She wore a gown with modest neckline and short sleeves. And she came with a whole wardrobe for the honeymoon, handmade by my mother and grandmother. As awesome as this may sound it made me feel we were somehow inferior to the Kupers.

This parable is about prayer ... as a way to build a relationship with a God who is working for good on our behalf even when you don't know you need help.
When you're a 9-year-old who hasn't experienced anything awful yet, you don't know you need a God who goes out to seek the lost, the sheep and the coin. You don't know you need a God who forgives the worst things you can do, either.

But Jesus when tells a story that says God is like an indulgent parent who runs to meet a child who has spent his allowance and come home with tail between his legs, it starts to make some sense. Even as a child you know when you've fallen into a pit of suffering you need a God like that. One who gives you the courage to bear the punishment for taking your cousin's allowance and riding their bike to the store (without letting an adult know) to buy popsicles for everyone.

Jesus sees into the hearts of his followers and he knows that some of them have short memories. He's pulled them out of the pit. But they've forgotten what it's like to be in that kind of predicament. Some are just about ready to abandon him and the God he's been introducing them to. They're ready to find a God with more obvious might.

Some of us are there, too, right? The government opened again this week after its shut down so any anxiety we might have felt about that is gone -- but only temporarily. The fights aren't over. There's a nagging threat of this whole process happening again in just a few more months. And this time it could cut closer to home.

Our persistent prayers will be important. But not because God is an easy slot machine, dispensing goodies to those who feed in enough prayers. God is not a get out of jail free card.

So if prayer isn't going to solve our problems, why does Jesus urge us to keep at it? Why is he so adamant?

It has something to do with faith. Jesus closes his ridiculous parable of the widow and the unjust judge with a challenge: When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? It's a good question for us to ponder, as we assess our own condition.

And it begs the question that this sermon turns on. The question that sits dead center in our life as a church:

What is faith?

Peter Wood, one of my favorite bloggers, a South African pastor and therapist, says faith is what gives us the capacity and courage to get through the unbearable things. Faith isn't valuable because it makes life easier for the faithful. It's not like a premier class card that gets you through the security lines at the airport faster than those poor schlubs who don't have it.

Faith is hard to sustain in at the extremes of life. On the one extreme, when things are going well, we often feel it's because "we've got this figured out.” We're the masters of our own destinies. And when we're slammed against the wall we spend a lot of time trying to figure out why God has abandoned us.
That's why Jesus is so adamant. That's why he told this parable and explained that God is not like that judge. Jesus knows that sometimes our circumstances can make us feel as helpless as the widow. Horrible things happen to good people. And THAT is the reason we should never stop praying. Through prayer we get to know the God who comes to us to share our common lot.

Through prayer we get to know the one who knows our joy and pain.

The one who arms us with hope and love and compassion.

The one who then submits to be crucified by the powers of evil so that we don't have to die.

Jesus is God with us.

And, I'm going to assert something really preposterous here: I think that Jesus is the widow, the one who so strongly believes that justice is her right that she will not give up until it is achieved, not just for herself, but for her children. The widow is persistent. Determined. Unyielding in the fight for those she loves.

WHEN WE PRAY, WE PRAY IN ORDER TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH THIS GOD. THE PERSISTENT GOD WHO IS WITH US.

We don't stop praying ... because God won't give up loving. And when we pray persistently we discover that God will never give up on us.

But it is hard to pray persistently. Life gets in the way. So often for us, competing goods get in the way. Lots of people were missing from worship last week, renewing relationships with family over a holiday weekend, running in the Marathon, or volunteering to provide refreshments for those who were running.

But even when we're away, God calls us into the church. And when we come here we know we will have prayer time, an opportunity to renew our acquaintance with this God who loves us as precious children.

That last question in the gospel reading could be heard as Jesus laying a guilt trip on his followers: "How much of that widow's kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on earth when he returns?" It begs a very personal question: will your faith be as persistent as the widow's? That's the nagging question that hangs out there, convicting us.

But don't hear it as a sentence. I don't. And I don't think that's how Jesus meant it. It's really a powerful invitation to be co-workers in a community where love is shown and justice made available-- even to those who have only their irritatingly shrill voices to rely upon.

Those of you joining the church today are responding to that invitation. And you're doing so by a reaffirmation of faith. You're making a commitment to join with this body of Christ, this church, to keep the faith of that persistent widow alive for another generation.
We welcome you as co-workers, as well as co-worshipers, in our community. We welcome the gifts you bring and (especially during our Stewardship Pledge Drive) we promise to match those gifts with our own.

It is especially powerful that our service for the reception of new members will include the baptism of an adult and an infant belonging to one of our new families. Our story as a congregation is renewed through our promises to assure an affirmative answer to Jesus' question: Yes! there will be faith on earth. We'll see to it.

Because we all need that kind of faith. Especially because our government will probably continue to be dysfunctional, our children and our parents will at some time suffer illness and make decisions that baffle and confuse us, the people we work with will from time to time drive us crazy and we will surely misplace our keys! Does anyone know where mine are?

Amen