

Restlessness

Menno Mennonite Church

October 16, 2022

Message: Life in the kingdom invites us into the tasks of pursuing justice, something that can demand tireless effort.

Purpose: To affirm the persistent nature of the work of the Kingdom.

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8 (Sermon Text), Psalm 121 (please read)

Synopsis: There is little doubt that, on some level, this resonates. Relatively powerful as we are we know that it can feel the tension between what we pray and what we see happening in the world. The lesson that would cast God in the role of the unjust judge in this case, with the take away asking us to persist with God until we get our way resonates at least in some way.

But from the first, Luke challenges this. By framing the meaning in the very beginning asks us to compare what we know with what we anticipate in the reality of the kingdom. If even the unjust systems of human kind yield justice even if it is under duress, how much more with the Kingdom justice resonate in the fullness of God's time? We are invited into the restless pursuit of true justice in this world and in the next.

Luke 18:1-8

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

² He said,
“In a certain city there was a judge
who neither feared God nor had respect for people.

³ In that city there was a widow
who kept coming to him and saying,
‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’

⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself,
‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone,
⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me,
I will grant her justice,
so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ ”

⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says.

⁷ And will not God grant justice
to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?
Will he delay long in helping them?

⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.

And yet, when the Son of Man comes,
will he find faith on earth?”

Parables leave a great deal to our imaginations. They have to, brief as they are. They are set up to spur us to think, are meant to explain a truth beyond themselves. They are meant to spur us to think beyond ourselves. It draws a parallel between the story it is telling and the reality it is speaking to by way of connection and comment, but not metaphor or simile, even if they might be along the way. Metaphors are meant to make the abstract concrete—to explain someone’s good nature as having a heart of Gold, not to speak particularly to the metallic composition of his internal organs. Similes draw comparisons based in shared characteristics—being sly as a fox gives the value of one persistent being and grants it to another.

All of which is well and good but is not the work of a parable. I don’t dive into this just to give another round of analysis about poetic devices or to get nervous about the nature of poetic devices, or anything of that nature. But it seems like a good moment to go into these differences because we are often tempted to read parables as simple metaphors or similes but there is always something bigger at work in the offing. Faith in Kingdom of God can be compared to a mustard seed, but that doesn’t make is a small yellow-flowering shrub known for expansive growth. We are given to reading parables in this way—as the poetic explanations of the way of God—but we cannot be left into leaving it only at that.

This is important today because this parable is especially given to this interpretation and explanation. It does not take a great deal of time to do a little bit of casual digging as we are so often given to and come up with a fairly direct interpretation of what we have here: that God occupies the space of the unjust judge and that if we manage to persist loud and long enough God will simply give us what we want. This text is offered up in this formulation often as part of the broader prosperity gospel that ensures us that God is on our side, what ever it happens to be, and, more importantly, on the side of blessing our lifestyle. It is a problem of this text and those like it because it seems to draw that conclusion so readily and easily, but it also misses the point. Does God listen when God’s children plead; yes. But never as the unjust judge who simply needs to be pestered enough to meet the threshold to act. To suggest that God is connected to this cartoon characterization of the unjust is an affront to the character and nature of God, and is simply untrue. To be sure, this parable is way less about God and far more about us.

But if we are not to make the comparison between God and the unjust judge, where then are we to go? I can only admire the persistence of the young mind set on gaining what they want—let's just leave it to that shall we? The ability to plead, wheedle and cajole seems to be bread into the species from day one. We understand this impulse. It doesn't take a great leap of imagination to bring us to a moment where we have felt pummeled like this unjust judge. I must admit to my own fair share of begging in my turn when it comes down to it. I think I presented an argument in favor of a new bicycle one time in an acrostic naming its benefits—points for creativity I suppose but I pity my parents for having to put up with it. Yet this persistent pleading is being held up as a value to the disciples for the work of the Kingdom—something which they will need as they take up the work of the kingdom in anticipation of the Lord's coming again.

I think we are far better to think of the unjust judge of the parable as a cartoon character of injustice itself. This is the system that cares nothing for no body and looks only to its own satisfaction and its own self-interest. This comes from the very mouth of the character itself, speaking to the need to attend to the widow as a way of simply solving a problem. Injustice boldly disdains compassion and lacks all sympathy; something as true in the days of the ancient near east as they are today. The widow does not pray to the judge; she demands what she knows is her due. She does not approach the judge with humility but with confidence. She does not appeal to his sense of reason or compassion; she apparently knows that is a fruitless endeavor. Rather, she knows her power is her persistence, her relentless pursuit, and her passionate conviction that she is due what she has demanded.

As such, these are marching orders to the disciples who are about to take up the work of the kingdom. They are being primed to the work of prayer and action in the face of the world as it is, as it can seem as it always will be. Jesus has just spoken to them about the needed vigilance of watching for the return of the Kingdom and has taught them to expect the wait to be long and arduous. Luke primes the pump by explaining from the very beginning what Jesus was speaking to and why, with the telling of the passion coming only pages later. With this in mind this is utterly practical advice. The work of the kingdom will encounter the world as it is—the world of wide spread injustice and relative indifference and that the role of the disciple is to encounter that reality with faithful witness and unceasing prayer. It is a realistic understanding of the anticipation of the kingdom is not merely the passive waiting for the by-and-by. Jesus just

before this speaks of the coming of the Son of God as coming with fearful anticipation and revelation in the moments where it is least expected. Yet we are given a role—to build the kingdom now, acknowledging fully the injustice of the world as it is, and offering only unceasing resistance to it no matter the cost.

It also must be mentioned here that just as the cartoon of the unjust judge is no accident here, neither is the choice of the widow as the embodiment of resistance either. Not only does Jesus bear in mind the explicit demands of the law and prophets that justice be given to the widow and orphan, but is also places the example of faithful witness in the form of someone who is quintessentially on the margins. Like the Samaritan Leper who says thank you, she is someone who has no means within the society she lives in. There is no mention of a concerned family supporting her quest for justice (remember here too that there is not justice system either, just people working out complaints one against the other). No one is looking toward her interests, just the demands of necessity that brings her day after day to do what she can do as best she can. What's more she succeeds. She does not change the system or the nature of the one hearing her. But her persistence pays off. She wins the case because she refuses to settle for anything less than the full justice she knows to be right. There is much to be learned about faith and hope through the model of someone who has nothing to lose.

I think we all know something of the restlessness of and about our world. We see it in the news of the day and feel it in our very souls. We know and we see so often the impossibilities of what need to be done, and the demands of finding a way to faithfully engage and seek a way where one seems so well out of our imagination to even think change might be possible. We may well find ourselves wearied by the disciplines of praying for the world and in the world when so much more would seem required of us. It is easy to forget that the way of prayer based on the model that we are taught by Jesus is one that calls us always to the vision of the kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. As such, all that would connect us to that kingdom is a matter of prayer, connecting the divine will for all things into the way things are here and now. Prayer is fervently petitioning the most high, speaking our needs and listening the best we know how. This is always true. But so too is living out the ways of the kingdom in the here and now by extending hospitality where it is most needed. By speaking our passions in the conversations of the day while never demeaning nor negating the humanity of those with other views. By taking actions to see justice enacted both individually and systematically. By doing

the hard work of looking at our own selves and our own positions for blindness to injustice around us and within that we may have long carried and struggle to let go of. Of bringing to bear the spiritual disciplines of action and contemplation into the complete and complementary circle that they are meant to be. This is all prayer. This is all working to see the kingdom come and to work in the kingdom here and now. Until that is fully realized, our work is not yet over, and our persistent prayer still matters, what ever shape it happens to take.

God is a God of justice, bringing the peace of the kingdom fully in God's good time. Our prayer—lived, spoken, dreamed, demanded—matters to shape the kingdom always. We are invited into the way of the kingdom that we might live faithfully to the new way of the kingdom. It can be disheartening when faithful life and witness is not always the same as effective life and witness. Yet we remain confident in God's justice, God's way, and God's hope.

Brothers and Sisters, where ever you find yourselves seeking the kingdom, pray on, in what ever shape that prayer takes. For we cannot rest until we all can call full freedom home. May the kingdom come Lord, and soon. Amen.