

Lord's Supper service

August 7, 2016

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I don't know about you, but I'm full, I'm encouraged, I'm strengthened by just even hearing of God's goodness in our midst. If you have your Bible, please turn with me to Luke 18. Have you ever noticed how powerful the question, "When?" is. When you get the answer to that question, it really can change your mood instantly, your frame of mind. This past end of July my family and I went to Georgia and Florida for some vacation, and during that time I spent a couple of days backpacking. And the question, "When is the next water source? Three miles or three tenths of a mile?" can instantly change your mood. A long distance drive with your family, and in my case with young children, who even at five and three—you don't have to teach them to ask the question, "When?" "Are we there yet? When are we going to be there?" And how quickly the answer can adjust their mood and therefore adjust the car ride. Even in the stories that we heard in the time of testimony, even in the stories of your own life. The question "When?" Psalm 35 even asked the question, "How long, oh Lord?" And that question is repeated time and time again throughout Scripture. "When? When are you going to act, God? When are you going to show up?" And that answer from our vantage point does adjust our mood, our frame of mind.

This evening's text follows a passage where Jesus has been asked a question by the Pharisees in Luke 17:20. And they were asking him about, you know, basically, "When is the kingdom of God going to be here?" And Jesus answered in verse 20: "The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." He goes on to describe to his disciples what he often does in so many of his stories, so many of his parables. He's drawing the attention to his disciples of the paradox of the gospel—in verse 33 of chapter 17, this paradox of "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it." And so out of that conversation with the Pharisees, then his disciples, he's continuing here in Luke 18:1-8, a parable that he's telling his disciples. Follow along as I read.

¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" ⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The reading of God's word. Let's pray together. Father, you have reminded us in song tonight, you have reminded us in your word, you have pointed us to your goodness in hearing from testimonies tonight. And so we come to you asking for your grace and your mercy to be encouraged and to be strengthened and to not lose heart, that we may always come with great

diligence in our prayers and our desires before you. Meet us even now in these few moments we have talking about your word, and likewise, Father, meet us by your Spirit in your Supper. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

So just briefly, I don't have a lot to say tonight. It really is very direct, and that's the beauty of parables in some ways. Jesus invites us to persist in faith. That's the point. Jesus invites us to persist in faith. The first thing we see in this passage is that it's a parable. A common definition of a parable is an earthly story that conveys moral or spiritual principles. That is very apropos for parables when it comes to what Jesus is doing, but as a literary device a parable is just a story in order to create comparison, to bring what's in reality in relief to what can kind of get played out in a hypothetical story. And Jesus does this often. He teaches to the crowds in parables. He tells his disciples parables. And often when he does that, like he does here, he gives us a window of what the parable means. And we see it's pointed to that singular focus that we ought always to pray and not lose heart. Right out of the gates we know the purpose of this parable. Verses 2-5 give us the elements of the parable that Jesus is using for illustration, and then [in] verses 6-8 Jesus is creating that bridge. He's wrapping up the parable, but now he's going away from the parable back to real life. He's making a bridge between the people in the events within the parable and connecting it to the disciples' real life. Which is to say that he's saying something about God. He's inviting us to have persistent faith because of who God is. There's a comparison by contrast in this parable by setting up the players in the story of the judge, comparing that to God.

So just briefly here's what's going on in the parable. You know most of the details are vague, which is some of the power of the parable. It is helpful on some levels to kind of imagine within a parable. I encourage us to imagine within the parameters of what the text does tell us. But we do. We can kind of jump into the parable. We're introducing our girls to Mary Poppins, and so it's jumping into the chalk painting, so to speak. Jumping into the parable and walking around and letting our minds think about each character, letting our minds experience what they might be experiencing, and then letting the text shape our vision of what the parable is meaning for us today. We read of the judge's character in this certain city which we don't know of. And we see that he neither fears God nor respects man. And we read that the widow keeps coming to the judge seeking justice against her adversary. Just imagine jumping into that chalk painting. Just imagine this woman coming to the judge as he refuses to hear her case. Think about just the initial pain that she may have experienced, just the initial injustice done by whoever this adversary is. Maybe she had something broken, something vandalized, or something was stolen. Maybe her money or her possessions were being extorted. Maybe something more severe, maybe someone was murdered. Maybe somebody just owes a debt. We don't know, but there is an invitation to understand the woman's pain of when there is an injustice and a crying out, 'When will justice be served?' Looking to the one who's supposed to be carrying out that justice and being denied. So with each time coming to the judge, then consider how much that stings each time. The memory of the initial injustice and then each subsequent injustice that she is denied. Being rejected by the very person she was meant to trust and from whom she was supposed to expect justice from. Then comes just the mixture of emotions: the frustration that he's not listening. The confusion: Why is he not listening? He's the judge. He's supposed to be doing this. The anger: How can he not be doing this? This is not right. The despair: I've gone three times. I wonder what he's going to do this time. Will he hear me this

time? But also the hope: Maybe he will this time. A mixture of emotions, indeed. What motivates her? What consoles her? What gives her strength?

And this pulls us out of the parable into verse 6-8 and how Jesus draws our attention to what the unrighteous judge says. Isn't that interesting that he brings our attention to what he says. Verse 4, this is what the unrighteous judge says: "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice." Not because she needs justice and that's my role, therefore I need to do it. She keeps bothering me. Because of that I'm tired. That's the word, the image that he's using about being bothered and being beaten down. There's this fatigue this cumbersomeness to her coming time and time again, and for that reason he metes out justice.

So here's the contrast. Jesus is pointing us to how God acts, what motivates God to execute justice. And this contrast is showing something about God's character. And in doing so there's also this additional invitation. The invitation as we persist in faith is also the invitation to live in this space of tension between waiting and hoping of when it might come to be. The 'When.' The 'How long.' The invitation is to be there. It's a reminder. It's a beacon's light. That an unrighteous judge, a man who doesn't really fear God or respect man, who's disregarding his duties, doing as he pleases—only doing what he's supposed to be doing because he feels bothered. The contrast cannot be more potent.

Now the parable can rightly invite us to ask questions such as, "What is justice?" and "Who is just?" and "What is God's vantage point for time?" All of those things are appropriate to ask from this parable, none of which we have time [for] this evening. But I will draw us to one last question: "How are we to respond?" Maybe that's the most important question, because that's the point of the parable. He's drawing our attention to one singular thing. It's an invitation to respond. Always praying, not losing heart. Jesus invites us to endure our circumstances with faith in God and with persistence in prayer and hope. Faith, prayer, and hope. Hoping, waiting, living in the tension. You see, because in that moment, in that tension—kind of in that when the question, "How long, oh, Lord?" or "When are you going to do it?"—there is that moment of space that echoes in our pains, and we long for what might be. And again, that's the power of the question, right? If it's a favorable answer, it so easily lifts our spirits. And if it's an unfavorable answer, it can be very devastating. So there's fatigue. There's apathy. There's anxiety. There's cynicism: *Oh, he won't listen. I've already asked him several times. He's not powerful enough. He doesn't care. He's not listening.* And with cynicism and apathy also comes a hardening of our heart. That language, that word Jesus is using of 'Do not lose heart' is just a sense of don't be discouraged, which is so easy when there is a huge gap between the longings of your heart and the actual living that out in reality. If we had more time just to listen to the testimonies tonight of that journey. That's the beauty of short stories: we see a beginning, a middle, and an end. But sometimes we live at the beginning, and sometimes we live in the middle, and we can't yet see the end. So our call, our invitation is to persist in prayer and in hope.

So just as we think about some things that were shared tonight, as we think about the flooding in Ellicott City, as we think about two years of civil discord between police and citizens, as we think about just the ongoing 24 hour news cycle which shows—which is good for the ratings—the bad, the ugly, and the evil of humanity instead of its good. We see a constant polarization in

the American political theater. That's just the things out there, not to mention the things that are going on inside of us and in our families and in our communities, our ingrained patterns of sin, our health issues, family strife, challenges at work, financial stress. These things can be singular in their weight, or they can be just compounded with all of them at the same time.

In the call to worship from Psalm 84 there is a phrase, 'The Valley of Baca.' It's not a geographical location as far as we know. The only other time in scripture that it's used, David uses [it] in the two kind of parallel accounts from Kings and Chronicles, where he's just talking about one of his battles. But it's probably most likely not a location, but it's actually something that is talking about an expression. It's a picture, it's an image of life, because it can be translated 'The Valley of Weeping.' And in this Valley of Weeping—when we experience injustice, or we watch injustice, and we long to see it met with peace and with righteousness and goodness—in this Valley of Weeping, that is where the invitation of the gospel is. To see—as we transition to the table in just a few minutes—it's the invitation to see how Jesus enters into our story. How he enters into life by being born, first of all, living a life of without sin and yet taking on flesh, taking on mind, taking on full humanity while maintaining his full deity—in that wonderful mystery. He takes on humanity and lives among us. And as he teaches his disciples, "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it" he demonstrates that himself by giving of himself. Philippians talks about it being emptying himself to the point of obedience, even to the point of death, death on the cross. There is an emptying of himself as he trusts in his Father.

So the invitation is something that Jesus also has done himself. He invites us into a relationship with the Holy Father to persist in faith, to always be praying, to always be hoping, to always be waiting, because we may not see justice in our life, in our circumstances. We might get glimpses. We might experience justice. All of those things are in the mix. But what we can point to in our faith is that there will be a time when perfect justice is fulfilled, perfect justice is completed, the renewal of all things happens. And that event is rooted in the fact that justice has been meted out in his Son, and justice and satisfaction is met on the cross. That's where it begins. That's where we see it fulfilled in all of the timeliness of God. From our vantage point what seems like thousands of years is but a day, and but a day is a thousand years, as Peter says. So in the fullness of time we see Jesus going to the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, for the satisfaction of the brokenness of the world, reconciling sons and daughters back to their Father and to their King, and for the renewal of all things.

So parables are fun. They're great stories. They're great pictures. There really are multiple vantage points we can explore. But it's very helpful when Jesus gives us what we need to be taking away from the parable. We don't need to be wasting time of *Well, maybe it means this or Maybe it means that*. He tells us what it means, and it's an invitation to persist in faith. Some may take it as a platform or a treatise on how we should persist in justice or on seeking justice or how we do it, and we should. We should persist in justice. But this parable is inviting us to persist in faith, faith in God. The faith in God who is so unlike the unrighteous judge. He's not motivated by you bothering him. He's motivated because he loves you. And because he loves you, we can go to him. We can go to him when we wake up. We can go to him before we sin, while we're sinning, after we sin, when we're praising, when we're weeping. He hears us. And he invites us to persist, always praising, always praying, and never losing hope. Until then we do. We pray and we seek to encourage one another. We seek to be encouraged by his word

and by his promises, recognizing that he is trustworthy and faithful. And we, by His Spirit and in his mysteries, we are encouraged and strengthened by hearing the gospel and then seeing the gospel in the sacraments that we're about to partake.

So the call to us is to persist in faith. There's so much in the world that's fatiguing me—I don't know about you. But I don't have to do it. I don't have to carry the world's burdens. I don't have to carry my own burdens. I let them go. I lay them at the feet of the one who carries them and gives me freedom. And that freedom is for you, as well, in Christ. So when he returns—and I don't know when that will be, whether that's a thousand years or now—it might change our mind, our mood, our attitude, our frame of mind. But regardless of that time frame, it's a persistence in our hope that we have in Christ. May he find faith among us when he does return.

Let's pray. Indeed, Father, we do pray for your word to give us hope and strength, that we would be reminded of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. May we be reminded of that as we celebrate the Lord's Supper tonight, how it accomplished our redemption, how it accomplished the forgiveness of our sins, how it accomplished a true and final and lasting reconciliation with God our Father. How that then shows us how then we are family, adopted sons and daughters, brothers and sisters in Christ. As we share in communion with you, we are in communion with one another. Feed us in your mysteries, in these ways that you have provided, your means of grace. We ask [you] to hear our prayer, to give us faith and give us endurance and perseverance. Oh Christ. How long, oh Lord? May we persist in faith as we wait to hear the answer. In Jesus' name. Amen.