

October 20, 2019 • 19th Sunday after Pentacost

“Do Not Lose Heart”

Sermon by Patricia Farris



Psalm 119:97-104

Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. I do not turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “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 long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

I hope that many of you are planning to stay after worship this morning to gather around tables in Simkins Hall, share in a light lunch, and listen—to God and to one another. These Round Table Conversations come at the request of our bishop and district superintendent as together we delve deeper into the theme of this year’s session of our California-Pacific Annual Conference: “I See a New Church.”

Our Lay Leadership Team—Mike Olsson, Todd and Sherry Erlandson, Jocelyn Hicks-Garner, with Nathan, Tricia and myself—have had some interesting conversation about the theme. And as we shared with one another, a few things became clear. “New” isn’t the opposite of “old.” The premise here is NOT that there’s anything wrong with this 144 year old congregation called Santa Monica First United Methodist Church. No—the questions we’re asking ourselves now call us to hit the pause button for a moment. Take some deep breaths. Go quiet. Listen for the voice of God, the leadings of God. Consider how God is doing a new thing even now to bring forth new life, life made new, a world and community made new through the grace and power of our Risen Lord.

We gather to listen to God. And to listen to one another. Respectfully, carefully, eagerly. To hear God revealing things through others that might be new to us, that might be different from our experience or our perception of things. And then to marvel and dream about what God might be calling forth amidst all the beautiful richness and diversity and wonder of this community of faith.

I keep re-discovering that although we are together as a congregation, we don’t necessarily all know each other. We might know a name or at least a face, but how much do we know of what’s on another’s heart, what’s stirring in another’s soul? Our Round Table Conversations will give us a taste of that today, to be continued at our annual Charge Conference on November 10th, and then we’ll pick it all back up after the first of the year, as we discern together how we live into the new church that God is bringing forth.

It would also be my hope that as we move through this season of listening, to God to and with one another, that we all might add to our prayer list prayers for renewal in the church. Remember one of the *5 Marks of a Methodist*—a Methodist prays constantly. And there are many kinds of prayer—prayers for ourselves and our needs, prayers for those we love, prayers for our world and its leaders, prayers for our sisters and brothers here and around the world...prayers for wisdom, prayers for healing, prayers for courage, prayers for peace. Prayers when we don’t know how to pray or what to say. Prayers for when we don’t quite know what we’re praying for, so we pray to simply be open to whatever God might have for us.

Today’s Gospel reading brings us an intriguing, if somewhat perplexing, story about prayer. It might be familiar to you as the Story of the Unjust Judge or the Story of the Persistent Widow. But there’s a lot to unpack in these eight verses...and I don’t think it’s as straightforward as it might at first seem.

Oh sure, there’s that judge, known as The Unjust Judge. Not exactly a likeable character. Described by Luke as one “who neither feared God nor had respect for people.” Oh dear. Not the qualities you’d want in a judge, right? After all, judges are described elsewhere in the Bible as being wise, reputable, commissioned by God to shepherd the people, leaders who ought to have known that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, as the Book of Proverbs puts it.

And then there’s the widow, known as the Persistent Widow. Refusing to give up. Pleading her case. Exceptionally remarkable given the status of widows in society at that time. Remember—widows, all women actually, could not testify in court, could not speak to strangers. Widows were especially vulnerable without the protection of father or husband. Anyone hearing this story would have known that when Luke talked about a widow, he was talking about someone who

was utterly desperate, vulnerable, and voiceless. Yet this persistent one would not shut up until, as we usually interpret this story, the heartless judge is worn down by her constant yammering and gives her what she wants. Gavel comes down. Case closed.

Or is it? I hope you'll bear with me for a moment, because this is where it gets really interesting. Let's listen more carefully to this story...

If you think about it for a moment, there are many things about these two main characters that Luke chooses not to tell us. What is the widow so upset about? We don't know. Does her case have any merit? She wants justice against her opponent...what opponent? For what? Does she have a case?

He's labeled "unjust" even though he eventually rules in her favor. Just took him awhile to get there.

And what "lesson" are we to draw from all this? Is prayer just about pestering God with our needs until a deaf or distracted or heartless God finally relents and give us what we want? Really??? I don't think so.

As JoAnn Post asks in *The Christian Century*: "What is the greatest injustice? That the [widow] was mistreated? That the justice was slow to respond to her claims? Or, that ultimately, he acts with mercy, regardless of the merits of her case? ...her request is granted without benefit of trial or jury. Is it merely justice that she receives, or perhaps an even greater gift?"

Ah...there it is. The mercy we receive from God in Christ Jesus goes far beyond our limited, human stereotypical definitions. Gives an even greater gift. We all receive God's grace and mercy, regardless of our merit. Despite the ways we fall short. As Post puts it: Jesus forgives sinners who will sin again. Feeds those who will hunger again. Raises up those who will die again.

God will grant justice, Luke insists. All who cry out will be heard. All in need will be helped. With a kind of limitless, meritless, expansive, awesome, humbling, saving, reviving mercy, compassion, and love that comes from God in our Savior, Christ Jesus.

Many of you will remember seeing portrayals of the statue of Lady Justice, eyes covered with a blindfold. "Justice is blind," the saying goes, meaning that justice is to be impartial, and administered without regard to status, race, gender, social standing. To this ideal we hold firm. And as citizens we must continue to insist on this blind justice for everyone across our land.

But then, as Christians, how much more awesome is the justice of God in Christ Jesus?! God's justice, eyes wide open, seeing all, seeing us. Seeing into our hearts. Seeing us as we are. Flawed, imperfect. Sometimes praying virtuous prayers asking mercy and compassion. Sometimes just yammering, stuck in our own selfishness and limited vision. Can we begin to comprehend that God loves us still? Eyes wide open! Because the acceptance of that meritless gift frees us to love ourselves and to love others with equal generosity.

Jesus tells us this story about how to pray always and not lose heart. And not lose heart—for ourselves in our need, for our beloved church, for our aching world. Pray always and not lose heart.

This is why we live in hope. This is why we continue in prayer with faith. Because it is this God who created us, this God who sustains us, this God who heals us, this God who loves us, this God who raises us to new life again and again.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

Notes:

Rev. JoAnn A. Post. Living by the Word. *The Christian Century*: October 9, 2019.