

Proper 24 C 2022 RCL  
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Psalm 121; Luke 18:1-8  
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St. John's Sharon

In today's gospel, Jesus uses another unflattering figure to make a point about God. Apparently all things, even dishonest stewards and unjust judges, can be used to learn something about how God's kingdom works.

Jesus describes a judge who is all about himself, not caring a whit for what God wanted or the people needed. Then Jesus describes a poor widow who was unjustly wronged by someone, someone who had more sway with this corrupt official than she did. The judge refused to grant the widow any relief, but she kept bothering him. She'd file endless paperwork at his office. She'd call him at home. She stalked his Facebook page. When he got up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, he found eight texts from her. Exasperated, he decides to give her justice so that she leaves him alone.

Before looking at the point Jesus wants to make, let's be clear about what Jesus is not saying. First and foremost, God is not unjust like this judge. He is neither unconcerned about the demands of justice nor unfeeling in the face of human suffering. Second, we do not need to sway God to help us, or convince God to help us, or shout loudly enough to get God's attention before he helps us. Jesus is not saying that we will only get what we want if we bother God for long enough. We aren't told to pray constantly because somehow God requires it.

Instead, we are told to pray always and not to lose heart because in the midst of our difficulty, we need to focus on God. The widow in the parable could only go to the unjust judge to win her suit. If she could switch to another jurisdiction with a better judge, she probably would. But she can't, so she keeps a single-minded focus on the only help she can get. We, of course, have a better option. Psalm 121 reminds us that, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where is my help to come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." Our help is from God and we look to that help through prayer. As we pray, we make ourselves ready to receive the help God has to offer, which doesn't always look the way we think it should. By praying always, we refuse to be distracted by all the other offers that would threaten to entice us away from our true deliverer.

Jesus says at the end of the parable that God will grant justice swiftly to his chosen, to the children that he loves. As we call to him, day and night, God hears and will answer us. This promise does not guarantee that life will be easy or without struggle, only that God will hear us. As we pray always, God is answering always, surrounding us with his presence, his love, and his peace, making a way for us his beloved. Our problems come when we stop focusing on God. We close off our end of the conversation as if we turn off our phones when God wants to call us.

The gospel today closes with Jesus asking, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Note the assurance that the Son of Man is coming. Justice is on its way. Things will be put right. Salvation and deliverance are promised. God will do God's part. What is uncertain is

whether human beings will do our part. Will there be faith? God is not asking about some sort of extravagant faith we could never hope to aspire to. Jesus is talking about the smallest, mustard seed kind of faith that is enough to move mountains. The Son of Man is seeking the faith that is waiting for his return and hoping to receive the fruition of our regular prayer “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” Jesus is looking for the faith of people looking to him.

We might seek more insight in the last line in our epistle reading today. Paul writes to Timothy, “As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.” Of the many points Paul makes, I want to focus on his instruction to endure suffering, because that goes hand in hand with our gospel reading.

At first glance, enduring suffering might seem to be opposed to praying day and night for God to answer us. Going deeper, however, we see that enduring suffering is one hundred percent focused on praying to God. When we are facing suffering, we have three choices. We can try to escape suffering. We can give into the despair of suffering. Or we can endure suffering.

By escaping suffering, I do not mean taking advantage of the means to alleviate suffering. Obtaining appropriate medical assistance to deal with physical, mental or emotional illness is a good thing, not an escape. Making healthy changes to behavior that remove sources of chronic suffering in our lives is also noble and righteous. Such relief can be God’s answers to our prayers. What escaping suffering means is engaging in unhealthy behaviors that enable us to pretend that our suffering doesn’t exist. Such means can be various addictions or addictive behaviors, which is why Paul tells us to be sober. Escaping suffering can also be done by going along with wrong behaviors that allow suffering to pass us by. Think here of joining the bullies, of whatever age or position, instead of resisting them. Escaping suffering is when we turn to something or someone else for our help instead of remembering that our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

Giving into the despair of suffering means to lose faith and hope. We define ourselves by our suffering. We have no good news to share nor ministry to accomplish. We refuse to believe that our suffering could ever lessen or we could obtain the strength to persevere through it. We can no longer see God with us in our suffering, even though we know that Jesus suffered as we do. Unlike the widow in the parable, we no longer bother the judge day and night because we have given up.

Enduring suffering means that we neither give up nor run away. We acknowledge what we are facing, and we turn to God for what we need to get us through it. Rather than looking somewhere else or falling into despair, we look squarely to the maker of heaven and earth who knows our suffering and who has promised to be with us always. Maybe God will make the suffering go away. Maybe God will make his presence clear to us in the midst of suffering. Maybe God will open a path to growth and purpose through the suffering that we would never have experienced otherwise. Most assuredly, we will realize that even in the midst of our own suffering, God is still showing up in our lives and the lives of others. We can witness to the love, joy, and peace of Christ that we see in the world, and even

experience it right where we are. We only need to endure our suffering by setting our faces squarely toward Jesus.

As many of you know, I have had to deal with fatigue from long-COVID over the past few months. I have learned some new times and circumstances for prayer in the midst of this particular suffering. I have also clearly seen God at work in a variety of ways, perhaps especially as I was not able to take care of everything that I would normally have taken care of. In the midst of suffering, I have to focus on God and prayer, and in doing that I can witness to the love and power of God in the world and do the ministry God gives me to do, even if I have to lie down every so often. I know where my help comes from, and I want whatever answers to my prayers that God has in store. I don't want to give up, or to run in another direction.

God did not create us to be stuck under the control of some unjust judge. God loves us so much that he keeps us under his own tender care. He hears us. He answers our prayers. So we endure whatever suffering is upon us by crying out to the Lord day and night. He will not delay long in helping.