

Pentecost 22C + October 16, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Luke 18:1-8

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“Then Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray and not to lose heart.”

Why “Then”? Because, just before our Gospel reading, Jesus has scared the disciples nearly to death. He has given them a vision of the apocalypse, of the final coming of the Son of Man, with lightning flashing in the sky from one side to the other. “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man,” Jesus warned them. “They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them.”

“Then,” Luke’s Gospel continues, “Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray and not to lose heart.”

We may not have a vision of apocalypse before us, but each of us has this same need right now, each in our own way.

- Perhaps you or a loved one has recently been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness; now, the predictable world that you knew before the diagnosis has ended.
- Perhaps you are coping with the death of a parent or child, without whom the world continues to be an unrecognizable landscape that, each morning, you must figure out how to navigate all over again.
- Perhaps you just had your first chemotherapy treatment and have entered a world unlike any you imagined. A friend of mine is in this place and wrote, “Chemo is an experience unlike anything I have had before. I cannot begin to describe the feeling, except to say that it is very difficult and anxiety producing.”

- Perhaps you are distraught about the desperate situation of Syrian citizens in Aleppo, where the horrendous intentional bombing of innocent people and the evil, purposeful destruction of hospitals that are trying to serve the wounded continues with no end in sight. The images and news accounts are too much to bear.
- Perhaps you are disillusioned with politics—well, not just disillusioned, but actually fearful for the future of our electoral democracy. What if large numbers of people refuse to accept the outcome of the presidential election? Could the system that has held this country together for 230 years break down?
- Or perhaps you're concerned about the future of this congregation. What is our place in this neighborhood, in Beloit, in the ELCA? What is our hope, and what is the reality? Could the world be about to turn?

So we, along with Jesus' disciples, need a parable about the need to pray and not to lose heart. As is always the case case, our lectionary gives us just what we need: in the Genesis reading, a model of persistence in Jacob's wrestling with God; a psalm that addresses *how* we strengthened, by lifting our eyes toward God; and in our second reading, a reminder of the means by which strength comes to us, through the medium of Holy Scripture and our own proclamation.

And then this parable, a colorful and pithy representation of God's kingdom that could not be more perfect for our need.

Before us are two figures that stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of power and privilege: A judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people, qualities that in Luke connote wickedness; and a widow, one with neither social standing nor community support since she is representing herself here in court over some issue in which she has been wronged,

probably consisting of money that's owed to her.

She's taken her case to the judge already and lost. She could have just left it at that. But like the hemorrhaging woman back in Luke 8 who touched Jesus' cloak, she has taken into her own hands responsibility for her own well being, and refuses to accept the judge's decision. Shockingly, she keeps coming back to plead her case, to the point that the judge actually feels harassed. The words "bothering me" in our translation are too weak; it would be more accurate for the judge to say, "Yet, because this woman is giving me such a beating, I will grant her justice...."

This is in keeping with the judge's character, though: He decides in her favor not on the merits of her case but because of his own self-interest. But the larger point here is the widow's persistence. Jesus concludes, "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?"

Our crying out, then, takes two forms: One in which we NEVER stop talking to God, for in that communication lies at the heart of our living faith: "O Lord, hear my prayer! Have mercy on me, God! Help me!" And the other in which we NEVER stop seeking justice, as we confront the wicked self-interests of the world in whatever way is humanly possible for each of us, in the life God has given us with the gifts God has entrusted to us.

And in the midst of our trials—our diagnosis, our illness, our treatment, our loss, our grieving, our pain on behalf of others, our anxiety about the future—we find our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, there beside us, taking our suffering onto himself and bearing us up with the assurance of salvation so that we will never stumble and fall. "My soul cries out with a joyful shout / that the God of my heart is great, / and my spirit sings of the wondrous things / that you bring to the ones who wait." Thanks be to God! Amen.