

Propping Me Up

Luke 18:1-8
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First Presbyterian Church
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There was once a farmer who, when asked to lead prayer in church, would always end saying, “And, O Lord, prop us up on our leaning side.” One day, his pastor asked him what he meant by that. “I’ve got an old barn,” said the farmer, “and it’s been there a long time. It’s been through a lot of storms, and the bugs have eaten at it. I got to looking at it one day and noticed it was leaning to one side. I thought to myself, this can’t be good; it’s only a matter of time before it falls.” “So I went and got some wooden beams, and I propped it up. It still leans, and probably always will. But it’s not going to fall down because it’s now supported on its leaning side.” The farmer continued, saying, “I got to thinking about that barn and thinking about the kind of year I’ve had – the storms I’ve been through and some of the people who are bugging me: eating away at my joy. And yet, I’m still here! I’m still standing after all I’ve been through. The howling winds; they couldn’t topple me. And you know what? It’s because God is propping me up on the leaning side.”

When the winds of adversity are blowing hard and the thing that bugs you most is eating away at your joy, is there anything there to prop you up? That’s what we’re left to ask listening to today’s New Testament lesson.

Jesus is speaking to his followers, knowing how hard life gets, and he tells them the parable of The Widow and the Unjust Judge. “In a certain city,” says Jesus, “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.’”

We all know about widows at the time of Jesus. They had no way of taking care of themselves. When your husband died back then, you were completely dependent on your family members and your community of faith. But for some reason, this particular widow was not being looked after by family or her community, no one to prop her up on the leaning side. In other words, she was powerless.

What are you powerless over? What do you need help with in life the most? Is there a goal you can’t reach or a need that’s not met no matter how hard you try? For some people, it has to do with losing weight or improving their physical condition. Others have bad habits or cravings they just can’t resist – everything from sweets and salty snacks to drugs and alcohol. Maybe your need is financial, making ends meet, or balancing all your responsibilities, getting started on some project. And there’s always something getting in your way, something blocking you. What do you do? Just give up? Or do you continue letting it eat away at you, not knowing where to turn or how to make a difference.

That's the choice the widow had in Jesus' parable – give up or just sit there wringing her hands in worry and frustration. But Jesus shows us there's another way: perseverance. In this parable, the widow turns to the judge, saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." But instead of getting justice, she gets another opponent – the judge himself. Not only is what she's up against making life hard for her, but the very thing she turns to for help isn't working either. Boy, can we relate to that! How many times have you done all the right things and still gotten nowhere in the end? That's the way this world is, isn't it? So many barriers in life. So much holding us back from making progress. And we know we could do it if only we would get a break.

When faced with this same frustration, the widow kept trying, she persevered. She kept coming to the judge for justice. "For a while," says Jesus, the judge "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.'"

What's going on with that judge? Well, the judge represents all the unrelenting forces in this world, those things that hold you back no matter what you do. And the perseverance of the widow, that represents prayer. We know this because Luke tells us the parable is about our need to pray always and not to lose heart. Of course, that's easier said than done. We've all prayed for things that haven't turned out as we hoped. And this can be discouraging. We've all been in desperate need and had our prayers seemingly go unanswered, and this can be really disturbing – like does God even hear our prayers?

And yet Jesus says in the parable, "Listen to what the unjust judges says (in granting the widow's request). And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?" The answer, is no. "I tell you," says Jesus, God "will quickly grant justice to them."

There are three things to be learned from what Jesus just said. First, when Jesus talks about the unjust judge, he's showing us that he knows the world is not just, not fair. This means that God works things out for the better even amid this unjust, unfair, fallen world, a world that is plagued by such evil intentions as greed and senseless violence, temptation, and all other forms of evil.

As much as we get pulled into such a world as that, we must even more cling to and embrace the world as God would have it, a world of grace and mercy and righteousness and love.

So if your prayer seems to go unanswered, the first thing to do is check that it is a just and righteous prayer, in keeping with the core of who God is, and not corrupted by this fallen world of ours. If we pray rightly, God will answer our prayers.

The second thing to notice is that Jesus says God “will quickly grant justice” to those who cry out to him in prayer day and night. This means that we have to really search for how God is answering our prayers.

If your prayer is just and righteous and in keeping with the core of who God is, then you can be sure that God is answering that prayer. It’s just that sometimes we don’t understand the answer we get.

In his book simply titled “Prayer,” theologian Frederick Buechner puts it this way, saying, “... Even if (God) does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers, that is what we are really praying for.”¹ In other words, prayer brings us closer to God. And the closer we are to God, the more peace and comfort we have.

So when you feel that you’ve reached your limit and there’s nothing you can do but cry out to God, know that God is there to take you into his loving arms and carry you through whatever you’re up against. Take comfort in that. Be at peace knowing that God is with you, even in the roughest of times.

And finally, Jesus says that the unjust judge grants the widow’s request only “so that she may not wear (him) out by continually coming (to him).” Because we know that God is greater than any injustice, we know that the righteous cause will always outlast and overcome any barriers this world puts up against it. We shall overcome with God’s help.

Look. Life is long and history is full of terrible injustices – great and small, global and personal. And yet God is still at work overcoming them all, all the needs of this world. God is always here to provide for and protect those who truly turn to him in faith.

“When the Son of Man comes,” asks Jesus, “will he find faith on earth?” Yes, as long as we keep the faith, trust in God, and do what we can to support the just and righteous causes of this world, propping up the leaning side. Amen.

¹ "Prayer," *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, (1973), 1993], 87.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace, how thankful we are for the glory of this day and for the love of family ... and friends ... and you. Keep us attuned to the little graces that make up the goodness of our days: the sparkle of the sun on the three leaves, the dew on a spider's web, the handclasp of a friend, the sound of music and the renewal of sleep.

Help us to take delight – as our children do – in the world around us. Help us to slow down and see the world through their eyes: the joy of playing for the sake of play instead of for the sake of winning; the wonder of nature.

Grant us the grace to come when our children call, and to enter their world with love and patience as you enter ours.

We lift up in thanksgiving those celebrating the great and joyous milestones of life. We lift up in prayer our friends and loved ones dealing with injuries, illness and disease.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus, who brings us into his loving arms, and who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**