

Faith that Persists

Sermon 34 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 20, 2019

Luke 18: 1-8

Those of you who were here this Wednesday night may have noticed that my daughter showed up in her snow boots and shorts. It rained some on Wednesday, and it was less than 80 degrees outside so I told her it would be an O.K. day to try out these boots she has been dying to wear, since they came home over a month ago. Kids aren't very good at waiting.

Wednesday morning, I thought *wearing* the boots was the end goal. Until she had them on and immediately took off for the bathroom. "What are you doing?" I asked her. "Getting on the scale!" she replied (as if I should have known, without having to ask) "oh." I said. ("that's weird" I thought to myself.) "Mommy, what's 5-6-little-5," she hollered out from the bathroom. "Fifty-six point 5," I hollered back. "Is that close to 80?"

And then it hit me. Mia was not only waiting on the cold weather so she could wear the snow boots. Mia is waiting on the cold weather so she can wear the snow boots and hoping they will help her as she waits on the next big thing which is to be 80 pounds. 80 pounds – or 8 years old, whichever comes first – is when she finally grows out of her car seat... for good!

And... I know that once she gets out of the high back booster she rides in now, things really won't be all that different. She can already see out the front windshield, she can roll down her window, she wears the same seat belt across her shoulder and lap. She can turn around to look out the back... it's not much different at all. And still, she waits, with hopeful expectation that one day... any day, really, depending on her wardrobe and a host of other variables... one day, everything will be different.

As silly as all of this might seem to those of us who have long passed that 80 pound / 8 year threshold of car seat freedom, we can certainly understand the difficulty of waiting. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches the disciples – with a parable, of course – about waiting for God's kingdom. Just one chapter earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus is confronted with questions about when the Son of Man would return, ushering in God's reign, God's kingdom. The assumption, of course, is that God will fix everything, that God will do the things Jesus talks about as he travels throughout Galilee - the sick will be healed, the blind will see, captives will be released and those stuck in cycles of poverty will be set free, like in the year of Jubilee. But rather than giving the Pharisees and disciples who'd crowded around an answer, Jesus responds, telling them that when it does come, when God's reign is ushered in, it will come like a flash of lightning, when it is least expected. But more than that - Jesus issues a call to faith, a call to persistence, a call through the parable that

follows not to focus on what we cannot know about tomorrow... but to live with faith today, while we wait!

Often we think about waiting as a passive and helpless situation. I wonder if the disciples did too?

Times of waiting are often forced upon us rather than chosen by us. And so often we approach our waiting with helpless resolve. We wait to learn the results of a medical test or procedure. We wait in the other room to hear how the surgery went. We wait to see how long the recovery will take.

We wait for the acceptance letter, the second job interview... We wait for the old house to sell and the closing date on the new one to arrive. We wait for the next paycheck so that we can pay our bills and breathe for a moment. We wait for the baby to be born, for the grandparents to arrive, we wait for the grass to grow, many of us waited for the State Fair to begin this last week and now we wait for the day that we get to go!

No matter where we are in the journey of life, it seems like we are always waiting on something.

Like my daughter, waiting for cold weather so she could wear the snow boots and waiting for 80 pounds, so she could get out of that car seat... we are always looking ahead, dreaming about our tomorrows and passively living our todays.

Funny thing is, so many of those tomorrows are built on how we live today.

But from the midst of our waiting, often times, it seems there isn't a whole lot we can do, except passively wait and watch the time go by.

We dream about that month when our budget works out like we have planned, when there are no surprise expenses and we can actually save a little. We look forward to the day when we can live comfortably *and* still give generously. We hope for a different kind of world to hand over to our children and grandchildren, a world where people get along with one another, where hatred and conflict are no more, where children are safe wherever they go and where joy and laughter are never too far off.

We wait for these days; even though everything that stands in the way seems too large to overcome.

So we pray. We ask God for help. And we wait.

Sometimes even our faith journeys can seem like an exercise in passive waiting. We wait for God to speak to us. We wait for God to show us the way. We wait for God to heal

our bodies, to calm our anxieties, to mend our brokenness, or even just to give us a sign that God is still there, listening to our cries for help.

We read stories in our Bibles promising God's presence with us, God's willingness to speak to us, and God's calling upon our lives and yet in the here-and-now sometimes the only thing we hear from God is *silence*.

"Where are you, God?" we pray.

And we wait.

It is from these familiar places of exhaustion that so many of us come to this parable today. We easily relate to the widow, torn and tossed about by the difficulties of life. We find solidarity in her sense of injustice; how easy it is for us to name the times in our lives when we have been wronged, when we have waited for resolution... We can identify with her as she pleads her case to no avail.

But unlike us, she does not tire, wear out, or give up. She persists in the face of injustice. She is an active waiter, praying for and demanding resolution. And as she persists, she becomes a role model for us... an active waiter... a woman who will not give up.

In contrast to the judge to whom she pleads her case, the widow's faith in God and humanity are strong enough to keep her working, fighting, advocating for justice. She persists.

Unfortunately for the persistent widow, her opponent is not just any judge, but one who is untethered to any moral framework.

He fears neither God, nor man, Luke tells us. And, it seems that he had no respect for the law, which repeatedly states that special care is to be taken for widows, orphans, and foreigners. Since he has shown that he will not be swayed to rule in her favor because of moral obligation, or for the sake of justice, or even an attempt at righteousness... the widow's only option is to persist and to hope that somehow, someday, justice will come.

In the original language, the verb used is one that describes something like a boxing match. The widow relentlessly pleads her case like a boxing opponent throwing punches. Fearing a direct blow to the eye – the Greek implies – the judge finally rules in her favor, delivering the justice she so desperately waited for.¹

What an odd way for Jesus to describe God's relationship with humanity!

"Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry out day and night?"

Even the one who is untethered, immoral, and completely selfish will tire and eventually respond... how much more does God care for you?

“He will quickly grant justice to them” to those who cry out in need, to those who persist in faith, and do not give up on God.

... but will the Son of Man find faith on earth?ⁱⁱ

God will be faithful to us... the Gospel insists... quick to respond, not like the unjust judge. But will we be found faithful, like the widow? Will our faith persist as we wait for God?

It seems this simple parable contains both a challenge and a promise for us today.

If we are to be found faithful, we must be a persistent people. A people who do not passively wait for God to come and fix our problems tomorrow, but a people who remain actively engaged in the process of justice-making today. A people who pray and act, working together with God and one another to make peace where there has been only violence, to bring healing where illness prevails, and to mend all that has been broken. We are called to persist in our efforts of building God’s kingdom - against all odds we are called to persist... putting action to our prayers that God’s Kingdom come and God’s will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.

We must persist in bringing this prayer to life as we wait for God to redeem our world. And when we are tired, and broken, and starting to wonder if God will ever come and redeem this world... there is good news...

As we persist, we draw nearer to a God who is persistent. A God who, also like the widow, does not grow tired of reaching out toward us with grace, and mercy, and compassion. As we persist, we move toward a God who is quick to answer our cries for help, who is eager to heal our illness, and mend our brokenness so that we might grow strong enough to do the same for our sisters and brothers who are struggling.

Sometimes we are called to persist without ever knowing how God is working. 35 years ago, our founders didn’t know what kind of church we would be today. And they probably couldn’t have imagined we (who were their mission) would help start another mission, one by the name of Shiloh Restoration Church, that would become a spiritual home for African refugees settling in our community. And a few years ago, when that mission became a possibility, we (ourselves) couldn’t have imagined that Shiloh, under the leadership of Pastors Felix and Nicole Iyoko would then plant another church in the Congo, one that would minister to orphans and widows, to natives and migrants alike.

This week I listened to Felix and Nicole Iyoko tell stories about their recent trip to the Congo where they saw children starving and sleeping in homes the size of some of our closets, climbing into beds made of cardboard boxes, and unable to go to school because they cannot afford to pay the tuition, which amounts to about \$50 U.S. for the whole year.

A few months before the trip, Felix and Nicole persisted in their faith, listening to God's call to go and see the place where the new church was being planted. They didn't know exactly what they might find there, but they persisted in their faith and they went. After meeting these orphaned children and talking with the young pastor at the new church, Felix and Nicole are working to make a way for these children, all 48 of them, to go to school. They persist.

On Saturday, Nov 2 children from all over North Carolina will gather at Greystone for CBF Children's Missions Day. That day the offering they give will provide scholarships for the children Felix and Nicole met in the Congo. Our hope is that we can send all 48 children to school this year. This is one example of what persistence looks like, this is one example of how we might pray diligently, and listen to God's direction, and while we listen, we can work to build God's kingdom here and now while we wait to see the bigger picture.

How else is God calling us to persist?

Just as our founders didn't know the whole plan, how things would work out, how far the impact of their faithful steps would reach, neither can we know all that might come of our small but faithful persistence.

We may never know how God is using our actions for the bigger picture. We may never know how God is working within us personally, working to bring an end to our pain, an end to our brokenness ... but we can rest assured that just as God calls us to persist while we wait, God persists toward us, quick to comfort and heal all that is broken.

Can we wait with active persistence? Speaking out on behalf of those who need justice, crying out for those who need healing, picking up the baton for those who are weary, and all the while keeping faith that just as much as we persist... God persists even more, seeking us out, finding us, and giving us the justice, the redemption, and the healing that we all so desperately need.

When the Son of Man returns, will he find a passive people, helplessly waiting OR will he find a faith that persists?

Maybe kids are good at waiting? Maybe we could learn something from their ability to wait with active persistence, refusing to accept things as they are and always looking for an opportunity to get one step closer to the goal.

After all, if we looked for ways to build up God's kingdom as fervently as my daughter looks to reach that 80-pound goal... who knows what might be possible!

ⁱ Levine and Witherington, 487.

ⁱⁱ Annotated / interacting with v. 7 and 8