

If I do this – will God be with me?

Exodus 15: 11-13; 16:13-26; Luke 18: 1-8

I am allowing that amazing message to resonate (from the anthem). I am going to ask you some hard questions this morning; ones that challenged me as well. Please remember no matter what; no matter the steepness of the journey or the loneliness of the stranger, we are only going over Jordan, we are going home.

The first problem (in writing this sermon) happened for me this week when I remembered that some of you had spent Monday night with Nancy. You spent time looking at a book called ‘The Short Stories of Jesus’ written by rabbi and scholar Amy-Jill Levine. She takes apart the parables and tries to remind us that Jesus told these stories from the perspective of his own holy scriptures which were what we call the Old Testament. It was a long time after that that people thought to write these parables down and it was even longer after that when someone who we call Luke wrote it down.

The Gospel of Luke was written last of all the gospels. It is a two-parter (he wasn't sure we got the point, so he wrote Acts of the Apostles as the sequel). He's quite clear on his agenda: I need to tell you about this amazing person who created this amazing new community of people, but I don't want you to be troubled. They are good people. They won't cause riots, they won't resist; they just want to be together and share everything they had and share stories with one another in this amazing fellow named Jesus.

I thought I better read what everyone else is reading and Levine wrote about something I forgot. We call today's parable “Persistent Widow” or “the Parable of the Unjust Judge” or we call it by Luke's summary: persist with prayer. Luke used this topic sentence for the parable: Jesus told them parable about their need to pray and to not lose heart in prayer. The writer of Luke (who I will call Luke for shorthand) believed very strongly that this parable would help us understand that Christians will be persistent. Maybe even so persistent as to make some judges uncomfortable or inconvenienced, but the most they will do is inconvenience you. As in the reading, even if you do not respect God, some widows keep coming saying, “grant me justice against my opponent.” He most often refused, but then finally realised she was not going to ever be quiet and so to get on with his day he said fine, I'll grant you whatever you're asking just so I don't get worn out.

There's a problem though. Jesus also said ask and you shall receive; Jesus also said do not worry about striving or anxiety - look at the lilies of the field; Jesus seems to say that prayer will bring

about immediate results; that God already knows what we are asking for. Why would we need to persist?

And that's when I came to my next challenge. Why is this parable so straight forward? All the other parables of Jesus were told to make me feel uncomfortable, to turn the world upside down and shakeup our stereotypes. The most famous example of this is the Good Samaritan. When we see someone doing something nice, we see a Good Samaritan, but to the population standing around Jesus hearing that parable they would have been shocked. It would have been like my saying, "and then a Muslim brother from the Mosque, next door and a Rabbi came into the Christian Catholic Church." It is not unheard of, but it has a startle effect. And so, scholars wonder, maybe this parable isn't about Luke framed it as, how you're supposed to persist in prayer. Maybe this parable, like every other one, is supposed to make us feel uncomfortable because we are in it.

There's also troubles with translations. At the Bible study this past week we went around the room and read the exact same Bible passage from a whole bunch of different English translations and found out how many words for different. When this parable was translated, there was some uncertainty and the widow we hear is coming to him and talking to him may have been much more threatening than in the original Aramaic. So, instead of being a persistent widow, she might have been a threatening widow.

What are we to do when scholars take what we thought we knew how to preach about and shake it up and throw all the pieces on the floor? Well, the first thing I can hear Jesus asking me is: got any stereotypes? I considered always this parable was a good solid strong widow who obviously at justice on her side and a mean, (sorry but) male, judge who had power on his side.

I've never met a widow or a judge who were all good or all bad. Heck I've never actually met a human being who was all good or all bad. But that's what I like in my stories; none of this ambiguity stuff. I want a good guy; I want a bad guy. My favorite story currently is when the knight comes in to save the damsel and the damsel has already completely saved herself and is having lunch. But the bad guy is always still very clear in those.

We don't like ambiguity. What if this widow was threatening or what if she was being polite *but* her cause wasn't actually just? What if this judge who didn't fear God and didn't respect people, still gave away 1/3 of his income to the poor? We don't know the whys and how's of this story and yet we typecast. I can hear Jesus saying, "oh really...you think, you are the hero or the villain of this story, but you are only a child of God."

But if I do this will God be with me? If I go about my day and not believe the stereotypes, not run to one camp or another in a debate; if I just sit in the middle and try and listen and respect everyone in the room ...UGH, it's going to be really uncomfortable. I'm going to have to listen to the needs of someone who I think is privileged. I'm going to need to listen for privilege when listening to someone I considered vulnerable. I am going to have to be attentive to the person who uses words that shock me or scare me. I hear in this parable the call to interrogate our stereotypes.

What are we to do when scholars take what we thought we knew how to preach about and shake it up and throw all the pieces on the floor? How often is it that we do persist in prayer; that we are very clear with God exactly what we need ... and God doesn't deliver. (I believe this happens because God doesn't deliver in a way we can recognise). I am one of those people, like in our reading from Exodus, that if you said: this is all the food you're going to get today, I would have taken a double helping. I do it today.

We are those kind of people; whether we were raised in the depression era and there literally wasn't food the next day and so we had to learn to ration or whether you're like me and you grew up in a house where there was almost always seconds but the world said better buy extra anyway, just in case. We live in a consumer culture that says you should have 30 of those (we might run out and it's a better deal if you buy 30).

Trusting that God is at work when God is not answering our prayers; trusting that God is at work in those people I utterly disagree with ...well that would be like going into tomorrow (federal election day in Canada) and trusting that no matter what happens, no matter what is announced at 9:00 PM tomorrow, God is with us.

I wish I could tell you that at fellowship today you will all receive a little pill that you can swallow so that tomorrow night no matter what happens you will trust that God is with you. Unfortunately, the pill has not yet been invented.

But one thing that has been invented by God is *community*. Places where we can be together where we can **learn** to listen to the person we completely disagree with; where we can **see** prayers are being answered, maybe not ours; but other people's prayers. Like going to visit someone in the hospital we're worried about, to realise he is trying to actually break out of the hospital because he's so bored (and Lorna and I have to sit on him to make sure he doesn't escape from the hospital); coming to church, having an old spiritual awaken something in us we didn't know was there.

To quote a great and honorable teacher, Professor Dumbledore, 'the time is coming where we can do what is easy or what is right'. And whichever choice you make, Jesus adds, 'God is with you'. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.