

### **“Faith Struggles” – Luke 18:1-8 – Oct 21/07**

OK – we’re going to have a snap quiz this morning! How many of you read along with the gospel reading from Luke? How many of you listened? How many of you planned your lunch during the reading? Now – those of you who were paying attention – how many of you think this is about God as the judge who caves in and grants the woman’s constant prayers?

Of course, while I’m writing this I’m neither a prophet nor a clairvoyant, so I don’t know how many of you responded, but I’m willing to bet that more than one of you – probably most of you – thought that this is a story about God eventually caving in and succumbing to your constant and never-ending barrage of prayer. If so, you can be excused – even the gospel author who included the parable interpreted the parable that same way with the introduction in verse 1: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”

A word of caution – there are several traps waiting for the casual reader in this parable. The first is the most common one, treating it as an allegory – a story in which the actors represent real people or groups. That used to be a very popular – if totally incorrect – way of interpreting almost all of scripture, and because it is easy to do – to say that a particular figure actually means somebody else – people still find it attractive. If we were to treat this story as an allegory we would say, “oh, the judge represents God and the persistent woman represents Israel or the early church” – and be dead wrong.

We need to notice, the judge is unjust. The text says so, explicitly. And twice the text tells us that the judge “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” Is this the kind of model we want for God? Is this unjust, uncaring, and miserly person the image we have – or want to proclaim – of God? Do we really think of God as resistant to our petitions, only caving in after getting tired of us asking? I don’t think so!

Yet surprisingly this theme of a God standing by and finally caving in under pressure does turn up in scripture – and fairly often in the Old Testament. Take our reading from Genesis for an example, in which Jacob wrestles with someone all night, eventually prevails, and declares, “I have seen God face to face!” Another story of persistence, of wrestling with God long enough for God to finally give in, and the victory is ours! That this is a pre-historic tale told for generations around campfires is all too clear, as is the fact that in its original version Jacob was wrestling with demons in the night (that’s what the bit about “what’s your name?” is about – to know an opponent’s name, especially a demon’s name was to have power over the demon opponent; remember Jesus and “your name is Legion”?) By the time this tale of Jacob’s wrestling was committed to writing it had been recast into Jacob wrestling with God.

To find examples of the same kind of faith story today all we have to do is tune to a religion channel on cable TV, or attend at any one of many churches today who proclaim this same kind of faith: “just believe strongly enough, just pray fervently and often enough, just suffer long enough and you will overcome God’s reluctance to grant you your request.” No, they don’t phrase the ending quite that same way, but the promise is still made that if you just believe and pray enough you will get what you ask for.

The problem with that? There are a bunch of problems with that, but the key problem is that such an understanding is yet one more attempt to put the believer in control of God. In this understanding – or as I prefer to say, misunderstanding – of faith the control is wrestled away from God by the person of faith. It’s not unlike asking us to throw enough tantrums to get what we want – and if that seems to make it look like the actions of a spoiled and arrogant child, well ...

Another main problem with such a belief – that if we pester God enough we’ll get what we ask for – is that if we pester God enough we just might get what we ask for, and that’s not always a good thing! It makes me think of the child who keeps demanding, “I want more cake! I want more cake!”

and the parent who finally gives in and gives the child more cake – and then has to listen to the complaints about a tummy-ache from too much cake!

But the main problem with believing that if we pester God enough we'll get what we ask for is that such a belief is not really the point of the parable in Luke. There are actually two points, and the first one – the one that relates to the unjust judge – uses that judge as a 'bad' example! The judge is not lauded for finally caving in – he is used as a counterfoil to show how much more just/fair/true/merciful God is! There's a huge, implicit "IF" in the conclusion in v.6-8 ... IF an unjust judge will eventually grant justice, WILL NOT God grant justice?" It's a rhetorical question ... the answer is a loud YES! God, who is the source of justice and mercy will certainly grant justice – and quickly! So, far from the unjust judge being an allegory for God, the exact opposite is the case – the judge is used as a negative example to reinforce the view of God as truly just.

We tend to miss this point of the parable – the promise of that justice from God coming quickly – in part, I think, because we are hearing a pre-crucifixion parable with post-resurrection ears. We hear the phrase "his chosen ones who cry to him day and night" as being the Christians, the church, as us. There is some legitimacy in doing so, and I'll return to that in a moment; but it is important to hear the parable as initially directed to faithful Jews suffering under a religion that had become overburdened with rules and rituals, that had become so encrusted with barriers to encountering God's mercy that the people were crying out day and night. Would God's justice come to them quickly as Jesus promised? When you realize that only days later the sky would darken and the earth would tremble as the events of the cross – and the empty tomb – unfolded, then the answer would also have to be a resounding "YES!", God's justice did indeed come quickly to those people crying day and night for help.

So, with that understanding of the parable being told to pre-crucifixion people, is it meaningful to the church with post-resurrection ears? The author of Luke's Gospel thought so, enough to include it even when the others didn't. Why? Remember that this gospel was written to a church holding its breath waiting for the return of Jesus, the Son of Man. And while they were waiting, they were suffering persecution – from the Jews, from the Romans, from their neighbours, friends, and even family. They desperately needed to hear the messages of hope that Jesus proclaimed; they dearly needed to hear that their suffering would end – and soon.

But they also needed to hear as well the closing question from Jesus, "and yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" They needed to hear this call to stay strong in faith, even when it seemed that justice was delayed, when it seemed that their petitions fell on unjust ears.

And God bless them – they did hear that call to stay the course, to remain faithful, to proclaim in turn the promises of justice and reconciliation. The faithful have done that for some two thousand years already, and now the promises and the question are being put to us. The promise of our cries for help being granted justice is there for us as it has been for all the faithful before us. The question of whether the Son of Man will find faith on earth is also there for us to answer. If the continued existence of the Christian faith depends on a theology of God as Santa Claus – granting every wish – then the outlook is pretty bleak, and we might well answer the crucial question of faith being found with a "sorry, not likely." But if we set the promise of what seems to be instant gratification alongside the other promises – the gift of the Holy Spirit, the peace that passes all understanding, the assurance of reconciliation with God through Christ's redeeming action, of eventually reaching that place where there are no more tears and no more sorrow, the company of the saints – when we hear this promise set in its proper context, and realize how those promises are already coming true in our lives, then we will be able to answer with confidence, "YES, he will find faith on earth, and we have been privileged to play our part in continuing that faith."