

Persisting for the Children
July 27, 2014
Amos 5:14-15 & Micah 6:8
Luke 18:1-8

O God, you speak to us in so many ways, including through the voices of children. By your Holy Spirit, speak to us now through the timeless wisdom of the prophets.

From the prophet Amos

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

From the prophet Micah

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

<Musical Reflection>

<Children's Message>

Our Gospel reading is one of the more challenging parables Jesus told. It has been labeled as being as "ambiguous as it is provocative."¹ Many believe this parable includes imagery for God that is unfamiliar to most: God as being in some way like an unjust judge.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city 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."

For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this

¹ David Lose. "Commentary on Luke 18:1-8."

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=810>

widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' "

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?

I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Let us pray. God of Many Names, help us to see that you are just, and that you value those who are persistent in seeking justice. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Everyone loves a good story . . . Think about it . . .

Why is it that children ask to hear their favorite stories again and again and again?

How many times have you listened to a lecture or a sermon only to realize that a few days later – or sometimes just a few hours – the only part you can remember is a story?

The more I learn about Jesus, the more convinced I am that he understood and intentionally leveraged the power of story in his ministry. After all, parables were his favorite way to teach. The pages of the Gospel record some three dozen of his parables.

While this morning's parable doesn't rank high on the list of the most well-known of Jesus' many parables, it does what any good parable should: it grabs our attention, and invites us to find ourselves within the story.

Depending on your perspective, you may focus on either of the two dominant characters.

You could see this as a story about a damnable judge and a distressed widow.

You could label it as the Parable of the Unjust Judge or the Parable of the Persistent Widow.

While both sides are worthy of consideration, our focus will be on the persistence of the widow, and on her role in reminding us that we are called to persist.

You heard me read the parable much in the way we think Jesus originally told it. While this is helpful, that world and ours are dramatically different realities.

If this sanctuary had a screen large enough for all to see I would show you part or perhaps all of a modern version of this parable crafted a few years ago by Compass Cinema. Unlike most productions that simply update the language or scenery, this one seeks to take the big idea of the original parable and then create something new for a contemporary audience.

This retelling of the Parable of the Persistent Widow is set in the late 1960s or early 1970s, and filmed in black and white. It vividly portrays a prejudiced and corrupt Southern white judge who simply refuses to hear the case of an elderly and poor black widow. He is happy to pretend she doesn't exist. He wants nothing to do with her or with her case.

Rather than accept this, she does everything she can to be heard. Despite numerous obstacles, she persists. She is always around. She is determined to have her day in court.

Her resolve is unwavering. Day after day, she presses on. Eventually she wears down the judge, and receives the justice she has been seeking.²

In both the modern retelling and the original parable, you can't miss the huge power difference between the judge and the widow.

The widow has limited resources, limited mobility, and limited options.

The judge is supposed to play by the rules but has decided he is above them.

The persistence of the marginalized widow is appealing. It is an admirable quality that resonates with readers and viewers alike.

They want what she wants.

We want what she wants.

We all crave justice.

² "The Widow & Judge" in *Modern Parables: Living in the Kingdom of God, Vol. 1* (Compass Cinema, 2007).

We want to be on the side of justice! We believe our God is just. We know that we are called to help make our world a more just realm.

There are so many ways we might endeavor to achieve this. Today, we focus our persistence on one of Jesus' priorities: children.³

With this in mind, let's return to the text of the eighteenth chapter of Luke. Earlier we heard the first eight verses: the Parable of the Persistent Widow -- the one who persists and prevails because of prayer. That parable is followed by another parable about prayer. Then, after both parables, Jesus reminds us how important children are in his eyes.

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."⁴

Every week we gather here and say together the Lord's Prayer. We ask that God's kingdom come; we commit ourselves to work to make it so on earth as it already is in heaven. If God's realm is to expand, children must be valued.

We must be inspired by the widow's boldness. We must seek to understand the challenges facing this generation of children, and be willing to persist in prayer and advocacy on their behalf.

The scope of the problem is staggering. Children experience injustice globally, nationally, and here in our community.

On the global level, injustice is pervasive!

- 1 billion children are deprived of one or more services essential to survival and development, and
- over 100 million children who are of age to attend primary school are not receiving an education.⁵

³ For more on the idea that how Jesus invests himself through how he lives and what he teaches in the Gospels serve as his priorities and should also be the priorities of those who follow the Way of Jesus see Christopher Maricle *The Jesus Priorities: Eight Essential Habits* (Upper Room Books, 2007).

⁴ Luke 18:15-16, NRSV.

⁵ UNICEF. "The State of the World's Children - Special Edition: Celebrating 20 Years of the Rights of the Child," p4. < http://www.childinfo.org/files/SOWC_SpecEd_CRC_ExecutiveSummary_EN_091009.pdf >

As our world keeps shrinking, issues that start on the global level become national issues. 50,000 migrant children have entered our borders so far this year. Most of these children are fleeing violence and exploitation in Central America.

Additionally, here in the United States

- we have the second highest child poverty rate among the world's richest 35 nations,⁶
- and 22% of all children live in poor families (or, including low-income families that number grows to 45%).⁷

On the local level, right here in Southwest Florida – a land seen by many as a subtropical paradise – injustice is all too real. In Lee County alone,

- over 30,000 children live in poverty, and⁸
- approximately 7 of every 10 school children are eligible for free or reduced cost school lunch based on their family's limited household income.⁹

While statistics present an accurate account of the challenging conditions facing many children, they tend to be an easy way to keep the matter at arm's length from our own experience. We must get closer to the children. Rather than allowing our friends and family to offer us safe shelter in a different world, we must enter the world of these children.

A couple of years ago I took a group of middle school students to St. Matthew's House in Naples to volunteer in preparation for their annual Thanksgiving outreach. Since most of the children who had come to serve had never been there before, one of their leaders gave the group a tour and a brief history of their ministry.

⁶ Valerie Strauss. "The Cost of Child Poverty: \$500 Billion a Year." <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/07/25/the-cost-of-child-poverty-500-billion-a-year/>>

⁷ Sophia Addy, Will Englehart, and Curtis Skinner. "Basic Facts About Low Income Children." <http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1074.html>

⁸ "Florida KIDS Count." <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/5320-children-under-age-18-in-poverty?loc=11&loct=5#detailed/5/1860-1926/false/868,867,133,38,35/any/11836,11837>

Note: The number/percent of children under age 18 who live below the U.S. poverty threshold, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. The poverty threshold was \$23,283 for a family of two adults and two children in 2012. Data Source: Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC

⁹ "Community Health Assessment,"

<<http://www.floridahealth.gov/chdlee/Director/CommunityHealthAssessment2011.pdf>>

The guide talked about the significant scope of caring they do, but emphasized how their efforts impacted children around the same age as my volunteers. When the guide mentioned that homelessness was a much bigger problem than we realized, one precocious preteen asked, "how big?"

The guide stopped walking abruptly, then shared that there was at least one homeless child in every public school in Collier County. After a long enough pause to allow my young volunteers the opportunity to process that remark, the guide continued: "I am sure someone you know is homeless, they are just too embarrassed or too proud to let you know."

I can tell you that this one story made a much greater impact on our group that day than any of the many impressive statistics that were shared or any of the labors of love we completed. I can also tell you that months later, many of these volunteers recognized that the few hours they gave up on a Saturday morning really mattered.

In the same way, I could stand before you and offer many numbers to substantiate this congregation cares about children. I could tell you how many dollars were given to this group or how many items were donated to that group.

I could calculate and tabulate, I could gesticulate and exacerbate, I could even pontificate and disseminate. Instead, let me tell the story.

Fort Myers Congregational UCC is committed to justice for all people, especially for the children in this community. This congregation opens the doors to its building for children, and invites them to fully participate in its ministry and mission – including worship.

You provide support in the form of volunteers and/or funding to other organizations who serve children, including:

- Abundant Grace Fellowship,
- City Gate Ministries,
- Gladiolus Learning and Development Center,
- Habitat for Humanity,
- Harry Chapin Food Bank,
- Heights Foundation,
- McGregor Clinic,
- South Fort Myers Food Pantry, and
- UNICEF.

And you faithfully support the United Church of Christ's efforts through Our Church's Wider Mission including One Great Hour of Sharing and Neighbors in Need.

You are already doing a great deal, and yet we cannot lose sight of the Parable of the Persistent Widow. Going back to that biblical story, I want you to ask yourself how did she get to the judge? What was it that she kept on doing that led him to action?

The Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes Jr., Senior Minister Emeritus of The Riverside Church and president of the Healing of the Nations Foundation, preached about this parable last year. In that sermon he imagined that the persistent widow handed a note to the judge.

Listen to the words he places on that note. Let them be your call to action, your prayer, and your reason to persist on behalf of children.

Justice is the air I breathe— I can't live without it!

It's not enough to complain and grieve,
I've got to do something about it!

I'm gonna strategize and organize—
I'm gonna vote and take a stand.

I'm gonna pray each day and agitate
until justice is the law of the land.¹⁰

I may not be able to do much, but I'm gonna put my faith into action.
Will you join me?

Amen.

¹⁰ James A. Forbes. "No Justice, No Righteousness." A sermon preached in Cincinnati, OH on July 22, 2012.
< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JQvTImr0W0&feature=share&list=PLF4D78FBDA94D3C54> >