

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

In my house, it's no secret that I'm the softy. My kids know that if they go to Mommy, they are more likely than not to get a "no." And they know that if they come to me, they are more likely than not to find a squishier target for their request. Now, I'm not actively trying to undermine the rules or the decisions of my wife, but I also don't like to say no. So they come to me, and wear me down, until I either run away and hide or else concede to some or all of their request.

Because I am this way, it makes it tempting for me to interpret the parable Jesus tells us today according to a similar dynamic. After all, the most common approach to parables is to make them into neat, simple allegories. As we hear or read a parable, we imagine ourselves as a particular character, someone with whom we identify emotionally or spiritually, and then we try to figure out which character in the parable is the stand-in for God, and then, finally, we do a neat little mental calculation to arrive at the moral of the story, the point that Jesus is obviously trying to get at. If I am Character A, and God is Character B, and C happens in the parable, then that means the point of the story is D. So, in the case of today's parable, we become the widow, God becomes the judge, and just like my children wear me down, so we should wear down God with our prayers until God finally relents and gives us what we ask for.

The problem is that most parables are not allegories. Just because I know what it's like to be worn down into doing something doesn't mean that that is what the story is about! As Pastor Nancy so skillfully preached a couple of weeks ago, this isn't how prayer works. Prayer is not something we pump into the vending machine of God until we finally reach the necessary quantity to earn the thing we think we need. Prayer is not like green stamps, that we save up until we decide to cash them in for something fun from the store. And besides, as much as I want God to validate my weak-kneed parenting acquiescence, I'm pretty sure God joins my wife in frowning on my habit of caving.

No, this parable is not an allegory, but is instead, in a different category of parables, the kind I've heard referred to as the "how much more" parables. If someone weak or deeply flawed can do the right thing, *how much more* will God do the right thing? If an unjust judge will eventually do the right thing, *how much more* will God do the right thing? Because God, you see, is fundamentally *unlike* the unjust judge. God is nothing like someone who has no respect for people and must be worn down by our prayerful badgering before dealing with us honestly or justly. Jesus isn't teaching with a direct comparison; he's teaching by telling us about *how much more than this God is*.

Friends, we should be careful anytime someone wants to tell us what a part of the Bible means and their interpretation requires God to be less virtuous than the most virtuous person you know. God is not fickle or capricious, and God's identity and action is always toward justice, and not just when we force God to pay attention. God doesn't need our help remembering what goodness and justice look like. God is the source of all goodness. God is fundamentally and unequivocally just. We can always trust that, and allow that to be the bedrock of how we read the Scriptures and interpret God's participation in the world.

So, the point of the parable is not about prayer being an act of convincing God of our worthiness. God is eager to act on our behalf, which means, we need to pray, because *we need to pray*. It's for us more than it is for God. It is how we move through the ups and downs of life without our circumstances overwhelming us or causing us to give up. It's how we hold on when it feels like life is a long, dark night and, like Jacob, we're in a wrestling match with forces we don't totally understand. Which is why Luke introduces the parable by saying, "Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

Friends, in a world that can often feel darkened by sin and despair, we must not lose heart. Because, as Christians, we are people of hope. No matter how difficult or disappointing today may be, or how fearsome the future may seem at times, our faith tells us that God is at work bringing all things to their fulfillment. God is with us now and God promises to be with us in the future, which means that, even though it is unknown, we don't have to be afraid. The Spirit is moving all the time, and Christ is alive and at work. For Christians, hope, not fear, is our heartbeat.

Ultimately, hope has been the theme for our stewardship campaign that draws to a close today. The symbol has been a tree, but beneath that symbol was always the foundation of hope. Because planting trees is an act of hope. Remember that story I told you a few weeks ago, about the Ethiopian people planting 350 million trees in a single day? It's the start of society-wide effort to reforest their lands, and the movement's leaders know full well that those millions of saplings will take decades before they are big enough to provide any shade. It will be generations before they become new forests. Which is what makes tree planting such a beautiful act of hope: you have to have hope for the future to plant trees; hope for people you will never meet, hope for people who haven't even been born yet, hope that they will one day sit in that glorious shade.

This is the sort of hope to which we're called as Christians, and that's why this campaign has always been about more than how much money we will give to the church next year. It is fundamentally about how we'll choose to live: We can let the unjust judges of the world – and there are plenty of them – strangle our hearts with

their apathy and cruelty and convince us to give up. We can watch the news and begin to believe the poisonous whispers in our minds that
everything is getting worse,
that our best days are in the past,
that real justice and peace are merely pipe dreams,
that the world our children and grandchildren will inherit is destined to be awful.

Or we can choose to live differently. We can hold fast to hope, like Jacob wrestling all night long with the messenger of God, waiting as long as it took for his blessing. We can stubbornly persist, like the widow banging away day after day on the judge's door. We can resist the temptation to lose heart and hold onto our faith in the goodness of God. We can plant things by our living and giving, believing that the blessing they will offer to generations yet unborn will be more than worth our sacrifices today. We can keep on praying, and striving, and hoping.

Yes, we have a choice – a choice about how we'll live. And if we choose to keep holding on, our eyes will eventually be opened like Jacob's, to realize that God – who doesn't need convincing to love us, and who is always more eager to hear than we to pray – has all the while been holding onto us.