

“On Account of God’s Speedy Vindication, We Don’t Lose Heart” (Luke 18:1-8)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. It is so *easy* to lose heart. I was receiving a prayer request from a Christian friend this past week who told me about *his* old friend who is going through more than one crisis in his life at this time. My Christian friend tried to encourage his old friend to call on the Lord during the storm (after all it is often the case that people are most willing to seek the Lord when they are going through hard times). But my Christian friend was extremely saddened – and I with him – as he told me how his old friend responded. He said in what sounded like a bitter and hopeless response: “*[God] and I are not friends.*” Why did he say this? The answer was simple. This man had prayed to God before, but he perceived that his prayer was not answered and so the old friend is acting as if he has lost all hope in God.

This is a shocking state of affairs, but it is probably more common than we realize because the Lord Himself in our Gospel this morning -- Luke 18:1-8 -- is addressing this very problem. This is the only place in the entire Bible that we see this parable of the unrighteous judge and the persistent widow and the evangelist Saint Luke begins the presentation of our Lord’s parable by stating the purpose of the parable up front: “***[Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that [the disciples] ought always to pray and not to lose heart (v 1).***”

This is a staggering and wonderful gift from God in a very simple and straight-forward manner in His precious Word to us: persistence in prayer is the church’s posture until the glorious second coming of Christ (Just, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 671); the Lord was teaching that a “constant prayer life is the opposite of growing weary or tired (Buls, *Exegetical Notes: Gospel Texts Series C Luke-John Sundays after Pentecost*, 71).” The Word of God is also straight-forward in other places about His divine strategy for keeping us in the kingdom: “***Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer (Romans 12:12).***” This constancy in prayer means that prayer in your life Christian is to be regular and frequent and in light of why it is so urgent (as in warding off losing heart) prayer is quite simply presented as a *necessity* in the life of the disciple of Jesus Christ.

We need prayer so that we do not become discouraged or give up if our petitions are not answered immediately (Just, 671). True prayer continues to pray in such a way so as to wrestle with God even as Jacob did as recorded in Genesis 32 and insisting unto the Lord, “*I will not let you go unless you bless me (v 26).*”

Along these lines of faithful persistence in prayer is the widow in this parable. The scene is absolutely *striking* (and in a second you'll see why the word "striking" is so appropriate)! This judge has all the power; and the original audience would have been shocked by this judge's shamelessness: he did not fear God – he was a real pagan absolutely unmotivated for doing the right thing – and he did not respect man (so he didn't even care about what others thought about his cold heart). Again, he had all the power, but he was also shameless. What was anyone going to get from this guy? Absolutely nothing!

To make matters worse is that this wasn't just anyone asking the judge for vindication, but a *widow*. *In the Hebrew culture this meant that the woman – having lost her husband – had also lost all of her rights; she was powerless; she was a nobody. What chance did this widow have in the face of a shameless judge?* The ancient church father Ephrem the Syrian is great at this juncture: *"These two were stubborn, but persistent prayer was even more stubborn. The persistence of the widow humiliated both the iniquity that was rebelling against God and the boldness that was behaving arrogantly towards human beings...Persistence transformed these two bitter branches, and they bore sweet fruit that was against their nature* (Ancient Christian Commentary New Testament III, 277)." Translation? The persistent widow beat up the unrighteous judge! He could not withstand her; she was too much! The verb here at verse 3 "kept coming" is in the imperfect...she came and she kept coming; she wouldn't stop!

"[This widow] is a different kind of widow. She fights back (*Concordia Journal*, Vol 24, Num 4, October, 1998: 373)." She was probably widowed as a young woman. She was healthy and strong and would not be complacent in the face of her troubles. Verse 5 uses the words "beat me down"...the Greek concept comes from the world of boxing. This is confirmed by 1st Corinthians 9:27, the only other place in the entire New Testament that uses this same verb. In speaking of what he does to his body to keep it under control while using this verb, Saint Paul's words in 1st Corinthians 9:27 are translated by the KJV as "I keep under my body and bring it into subjection," by the NAS as "I buffet my body and make it my slave," by the Williams translation, "I keep on beating and bruising my body and making it my slave," and the Beck translation, "I beat my body and make it my slave."

In high school I had a friend who came to me explaining that she was being harassed by some scary guys. I told her that she should let me take her to my former Karate *dojo*. I met up with her one evening and introduced her to my former *sensei*. She became an amazing student eventually advancing to black belt and became the California state Karate *kumite* or tournament fighting champion. I was considerably bigger and stronger than my friend, but there was no way I ever wanted to get into a fight with her!

In this parable the unrighteous judge met up with a widow with a black belt. The Word of God at verse 5 is that the unrighteous judge is concerned that this widow is going to “strike [him] under the eye.” This is the actual original language translation!

Well, this can be all very exciting and as the Law is always good at doing, you can start to hear the Rocky song “Eye of the Tiger” in your mind as you psych yourself up to be fighting in prayer like this widow (the widow does after all stand for the church and all of her members like you); or to be wrestling in prayer like Jacob, but be careful, because if this is how we leave Luke 18 we are all going to be in a lot of trouble. We’re only half-way there.

At verse 3 this unrighteous judge wasn’t playing around either. The text says, “For a while he refused (v 4).” “For a while!” “How long is “a while?” Well you know right? A while can seem like an eternity. Just review what you’ve gone through in your life. In my own, there have been many, many occasions in everyday life when I realized that “a while” was way too long for me to endure. I can think of many examples! I remember waiting anxiously for the doctor’s report on my wife after she gave birth to our first child and she had complications. I remember how long “a while” was when I was with my dad in the hospital and we knew the situation was critical. I thought “a while” was way too long when I had my first panic attack ever and as it felt like a very, very long time to make it to the ER. I remember getting to the point in doing my doctoral work that I felt that I just couldn’t take the process anymore and almost quit... “a while” felt like a crushing weight! How often have you been confronted by “a while” and when you realized that you would have to wait some more, you just wanted to cry? You just wanted to crumble? How much longer is my health going to be this way? How much longer am I going to have to endure this problem in my family? How much longer am I going to have to go through this situation at work? It’s in these moments that we relate to the rest of the symbolism of the widow...we feel as though we have no rights, no power...and we feel like giving up. Even the martyrs in the book of Revelation (at 6:10) are recorded as crying out to the Lord:

“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

“For a while” makes us cry out, “How long? How long? How long?!”

So we are not allowed to put ourselves – even if we are black belt prayer warriors – on a pedestal. We just aren’t that impressive. Our so-called “consistency” in prayer is lacking; we do not pray as we ought to and we often fall short of our Lord’s call to us to pray this way...we never pray enough. And when our Lord asks this Law-oriented question at the end of our

Gospel text: ***“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth (v 8)?” If we’re honest...this isn’t exactly the most comforting Scripture in God’s Holy Word!***

So let me tell you what’s ***really*** impressive. What is really impressive is this unrighteous judge. Jesus had made his moral condition clear: he neither feared God nor respected man, but then something happens. He is untrue to himself. He is unrighteous towards his own unrighteousness and he contradicts himself. This is the real surprise. This judge surely had the resources to shut up this widow. He was already shameless. He could have taken her out. But he doesn’t. And this is the real surprise.

What is really amazing though is that our Lord Jesus compares God to this unrighteous judge! Now this is mind-blowing. But Jesus is magnificently using a powerful tool for making his point: it is an argument moving from the lesser to the greater: ***if this shameless pagan judge -- WHO IS THE VERY OPPOSITE OF WHAT GOD IS LIKE – somehow comes around and ends up helping the widow, HOW MUCH MORE WILL OUR GOD OF LOVE, AND MERCY, AND COMPASSION HELP HIS DEAR CHILDREN?!*** This is the key to the parable.

The Lord Jesus is not exalting you and me because we wrestle in prayer -- which certainly describes what God’s people do as they live in faith -- but He is rather exalting the compassion and mercy that God has for sinners! Jesus leads us to this conclusion at verses 7-8a:

“And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.”

And this is the Gospel/God’s grace in this text! First of all, Jesus calls you His people “his elect.” Why is this so vital (see Romans 8:28-39; Ephesians 1:3-14; 1st Peter 1:3-12 & 2nd Thessalonians 2:13-17)? One Lutheran theologian writes, *“Election is purest Gospel, the assurance to the believer that his entire [forgiveness and new life] were caused only by God’s grace in Christ from eternity, not dependent in any way on the individual’s works or faith...Likewise, the believer, because of his many trials and tribulations, the devil, the world, and his own flesh, he may begin thinking that the Lord is slow to help him...He is mistaken...Not only will Jesus take up [the Christian’s] cause but will do it quickly, speedily (Buls, 73).”*

But isn’t this where we shake our heads? “What do you mean ***speedily***?!” A popular answer is to say that when Christ appears we will quite simply be so overwhelmed by the joy and exaltation of the glory of God that we will instantaneously forget about our tribulation...in this sense what seemed like a very long time will – all of a sudden – seem like nothing. This is a pretty good answer, but I humbly submit to you that it isn’t good enough. My good friend

Pastor Mark Jasa – who is a gifted evangelist – once said to a homeless man that Jesus died to save him from his sins. The homeless man was bold and -- acting as if Pastor Mark's words were irrelevant -- told Pastor Mark that he didn't believe in what Jesus did. To which Pastor Mark replied with a blessed impulse: "Too late!" Clarifying to the man that whether he believed it or not, it was true: Jesus had shed His blood for this man. When Pastor Mark said this to this man, the man was stunned and he started to cry saying, "No one has ever said that to me!" It was as if Pastor Mark was witnessing the work of the Spirit through the Gospel before his very eyes.

I submit to you dear Christian that Jesus' vindication was said to come **so** speedily, that it has – in a very important sense – already come. When He took up your cause, and dealt the source of all of your tribulation – sin and Satan – a fatal blow; crushing the adversary's head by the crushing strike of His holy cross when your sin was covered by His life in His blood; and by His victorious resurrection completely conquering death itself. Jesus has come speedily and continues to do so through His Word and Sacrament. He comes speedily in the midst of your crying, "How long?" through His comforting Gospel and His affirming Word. He comes speedily every time you receive His true body and blood in His Holy Sacrament. He comes speedily when He fills your heart and mind with the life-changing Word and then leads you to bend your knees in prayer, praying back to God His promises to you for example:

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angles nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8)."

He has come speedily and will come speedily again. Thus it is really a "both-and" Gospel: He has already come speedily to cover you in the life of His blood and in the victory of His resurrection, holding you in His hand right now so that no one can snatch you from Him (John 10:28); and He is coming right here in this divine service through His Word and Sacrament; and He is coming again in glory...speedily...and when He does, we will be so blessed that we won't even be able to remember how long we were waiting. This is why Christian...this is why we do not lose heart!