

Sunday August 25, 2019 - First Presbyterian Church of Redlands

The First Reading is Jeremiah 29:1, 11-14

¹These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

¹¹ For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, ***plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*** ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

The Second Reading is Luke 18:1-8

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to ***pray always and not to lose heart.*** ² Jesus said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And ***will not God grant justice*** to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, ***will he find faith on earth?***"

The Message is entitled, *In the Meanwhile*

I begin with the end of this passage, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he ***find faith on earth?***" Commentator Randolph Harris answers this question in his commentary writing, "The Lord may, but in the Western World finding faith may take effort. Ours is a secular age in which unbelief is a valid option. Where faith and the church's central role in society were once given, [yet] for many [today] the church is no longer necessary." Europe has seen a steep decline in church going for decades and the N-O-N-E-S are on the rise here in America, those who claim no religious affiliation. Another group is growing too and they are called the DONES, those who no longer participate in the institutional church even though they once

faithfully did. Where will the faithful be found? Will the Son of Man ***find faith among us***? It is an ominous question to ponder in the context of our present age.

But, let me back up in the text, not to the beginning of our text, but to the preceding text in Luke's Gospel. Jesus is conversing with a group of Pharisees. They had asked Jesus, "When is the kingdom of God coming?" Jesus's response is the inspiration for the title of the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, "I tell you on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left." *Left Behind...*

I can vividly remember attending a film presentation as a high school student on this particular apocalyptic passage, along with its literal interpretation of The Revelation to John. My recollection of the film is that it was designed to scare you into heaven, otherwise you'd be left behind! The tune of the movie's eerie theme song easily flooded my thoughts as I composed this sermon, "A man and wife asleep in bed, she hears a noise and turns her head; he is gone. I wish we'd all be ready. There's no time to change your mind, the Son has come and you've been left behind."

Jesus did not want the Pharisees or anyone else to be unprepared, to be left behind when the Son of Man came. Yet, Jesus did not give the Pharisees any specifics about when the kingdom would fully come. The passage was just serious encouragement or should I say scare tactics... "the coming of the kingdom will be like it was in the days of Noah. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them... like it was in the days of Lot; they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them." I can't even imagine how the Pharisees were processing this pep talk by Jesus, but this is exactly where we entered the text today.

Then. "Then Jesus told the Pharisees a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." For context, which is always important, remember that Jesus is just about to enter Jerusalem for the last time. It is clear that Jesus knows what lies ahead of him. He knows it will not be easy for the Pharisees, the disciples or any other followers. It wasn't easy then and it certainly isn't easy now. Matthew and Mark remind us at the beginning of their gospels that the kingdom has come near, yet until the Son of Man comes again, the kingdom of God will not be fully present. **In the meanwhile**, Jesus tells the Pharisees a parable about their need to "pray always and not to lose heart."

So, what about the parable? The characters in the parable are polar opposites. A widow with no social status, no power and little hope of a fair hearing without a male to plead her case, and a judge who had elite social status and the power to determine one's future. The parable pits a courageously fearless widow, with her unspecified complaint, against an equally fearless judge who has no incentive for dispensing justice, for doing the right thing.

Biblical commentator Randolph Harris writes of this parable, "It is simultaneously painful and humorous." He continues saying, "It's humor is rooted in the way it embodies Luke's theme of reversal: the powerless widow beating the faithless and disrespectful, albeit powerful judge, black and blue with her persistent pleas for justice. She is 'giving him a black eye,' which is the literal meaning of the Greek verb translated as 'wearing me out.'" The judge realizes that this widow is not going to give up. She is going to keep coming to plead her case day after day after day, even if he never listens to her plea and offers her justice. She is going to keep coming until she no longer has breath. Given that possibility, the judge determines it is better to relent and offer her justice just to get her off his daily agenda.

Next Jesus says to the Pharisees, "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" Jesus argues from lesser to greater suggesting that God will be more just and more responsive than the unjust judge. Hence, why this is a parable not about justice per se, but about persistent prayer and perseverance.

Pray always or as Paul says to the church in Thessaloniki, "Pray without ceasing." Pray and pray some more. Be persistent just as the widow was in the parable. Persevere in prayer, that is pray for justice, pray for your heart's desire, regardless of the outcome. Persevere, says Jesus, even if your prayers go unanswered day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, just like it did for the Israelites who had been carted off to Babylonia by King Nebuchadnezzar.

The exiled Israelites prayed and prayed to return to Jerusalem, but listen to the word of the Lord through Jeremiah, "Only after 70 years... will I restore your fortunes and bring you back." 70 years? Are you willing to cry out day and night for 70 years, even if it takes that long to have your prayer answered the way you hoped? Would you still have faith?

But Jesus said in our text, "I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them." Quickly? Often our experience is more like the Israelites. We have sought justice here on earth and beat on the doors of heaven, yet we wait and wait and wait for

a response. Like families of those killed by gun violence who continually cry out for better legislation and more extensive mental health services, only to have their requests blocked again and again. Like parents who cry out for daily sustenance only to watch their children starve, while large quantities of food go to waste elsewhere. Like indigenous communities in Chile and Argentina who cry out as they struggle to pay for sewage systems, drinking water and schools, while foreign mining companies profit from the mineral riches of their lands. Like those denied opportunities for work or leadership because of systemic racism or ageism or homophobia to which the majority is either naively oblivious or, worse, in which the majority is complicit.

The parable's answer to this painful reality is this: God's will will eventually be done. ***In the meanwhile***, we have to hang in there and remain faithful. Yet, what is faith? Peter Wood, a South African pastor and therapist, says faith is what gives us the capacity and courage to get through the unbearable things. Faith helps us at the extremes of life to trust God regardless of the outcomes. Faith like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's as they faced a furnace of blazing fire. They said whether our God saves us or not, we will not bow to your gods, O Nebuchadnezzar. Faith like Stephen who prayed while he was being stoned, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit... and do not hold this sin against them."

Jesus knew that the days ahead would not be easy. The days ahead of us will not be easy either, for injustices of epic portions weigh heavily on humanity and this beautiful planet we call home. Yet, are we to throw up our hands and just give up believing that we can't possibly make a difference in all that is not right in this world?

Jesus urges us not to. ***In the meanwhile***, as poet Wendell Berry writes, "So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Love someone who does not deserve it... Be joyful though you have considered all the facts."

In the meanwhile, let's keep praying! Let's keep striving for justice! Let's not lose heart! For we have a future with hope, because we belong to God. Amen.