

SERMON TITLE: "Parables of Power: Praying for Justice"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 18:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 31, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, after my father-in-law Joe had died, my mother-in-law Cordelia was involved in a legal dispute with her neighbor. The neighbor claimed that Joe had allowed him to put his fence in a certain place, and therefore, the land up to the fence belonged to the neighbor. Cordelia knew that that strip of land belonged to her, and she was quite certain that Joe had never given the neighbor permission to put his fence on their land. If Joe hadn't actively protested the fence, that was only because Joe was a nice guy who didn't want to make waves, not because he intended to change the property line or give away their land. Of course, by the time Cordelia was in the dispute with the neighbor, Joe was dead, so he wasn't any help in settling the conflict. Consequently, both the neighbor and Cordelia hired lawyers and pled their case to a judge. Being a widow who needed strength and being a woman of faith, you can be sure that my mother-in-law also spent some time talking with God about the problem. Cordelia was praying for justice.

Throughout this month of July, we've been reading Jesus' "Parables of Power" from the Gospel of Luke. We've heard Jesus speak of the power that comes from investing in the future, sowing and growing, seeking and finding, and managing faithfully. Today's scripture text from Luke 18 includes two stories which involve prayer and justice. Since most of us have felt wronged or betrayed at one time or another, let's see how these parables of power can assist us in praying for justice.

1—PRAY ALWAYS AND DON'T LOSE HEART

We begin with the first parable about the widow who sought help from a judge. We aren't told what her problem was, but Jesus' story indicates there was an opponent. The judge wasn't very sympathetic, and for a while, he refused to do anything to help the widow. But because she kept

pestering him, he finally gave in and decided to grant her justice. Verse one actually gives away the meaning of this story: "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." The idea seems to be that, if we persist in asking, our prayers will be answered. If a judge who neither fears God nor respects people will eventually provide what is needed, then how much more will God who has chosen to love us. If we are crying out to God day and night, if we are holding on to our faith, then we can be sure that God will grant us justice.

Pray always and don't lose heart. The message is simple, right? Most of us know, however, that this message is easier said than done. I'm sure Jesus knew that also. The gospels tell us of many times that Jesus went off alone to pray. Some ancient manuscripts of Luke 22 even indicate that Jesus prayed so hard on the night before he died that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling on the ground" (v. 44). Like an unjustly convicted person on death row, Jesus pled his case, asking God for a way out of that terrible injustice that was about to happen. Jesus was begging. Not just in the daytime, but after dark, while his disciples were sleeping, Jesus poured out his very being to God in prayer.

Unfortunately, in Jesus' case and many of ours, injustices do happen, in spite of our prayers, and that sometimes is very hard for us to reconcile with our faith. Like Jesus, we cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When we believe that God cares about us, it's really hard to make sense out of situations in which we pray our guts out, and yet we feel the horrible impact of suffering and death. How is that fair? Injustice is all too common in our human experience.

And, yet, Luke 18:1 indicates that Jesus told this parable so we would pray always and not lose heart. This conundrum makes me wonder: Do you suppose Jesus said what he did not as a guarantee that justice will always happen quickly but because justice might not ever happen unless people pray that it be so? I suspect that the reason to pray and not lose heart is so that we will continue to seek the ideal of justice, to hope for it to happen, and thus to will God, ourselves, and others to make it happen in our world.

Good things sometimes happen by accident, but more often good things happen by someone's intentionality. Praying for justice may not produce the results we want in our own personal situations every time. But repeatedly, persistently, and consistently holding up the ideal of justice in our actions, words, and prayers surely does help to bring about justice in our society and world. Through good times and bad, through thick and thin, it's a powerful thing to pray always and not lose heart.

2—HUMBLE OURSELVES BEFORE GOD

If the power of praying for justice begins with the instruction to pray always and not lose heart, then it continues with the mandate to humble ourselves before God. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee was a law-abiding fellow who obeyed all the rules of Judaism. So, when he arrived at the temple, he prayed with assurance, thanking God that he was better than everyone else. The tax collector, on the other hand, was certain of his own sinfulness, and so he stood in the temple with his head bowed. Beating on his chest in shame, he prayed for God's mercy. In Jesus' story, it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who went home justified.

One of my theology professors taught that "justified" means "*just as if I'd never sinned.*" Justification is God's act of grace toward us that takes away our guilt. Justification wipes away our sins. Justification cleans us up and starts us over again, fresh and new.

Someone could ask, Well, how is that justice? How can God say that the law-abiding Pharisee is guilty of sin, and the sinful tax collector is cleaned up and free of fault? That's another conundrum of our Christian faith, isn't it? But it shouldn't surprise any of us who are familiar with the Gospels. In Luke chapter one, Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang out a song of role reversals. She magnified the Lord and rejoiced because God had looked with favor on her lowliness. Mary sang out that the hungry would be filled up and the rich and powerful would be brought down from their thrones and sent away empty. Later, in Luke chapter 4, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus preached that the captives would be released, and the blind would see. Jesus often said things like that: "The first shall be last, and the last

shall be first.” “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” In Jesus’ gospel, or good news, everything got turned upside down. Even little children were welcome, for they were the ones to whom God’s kingdom belongs.

Where is the justice in any of that? Well, gospel justice is different. It isn’t based on how hard we’ve worked, how much success we’ve had, or how much money we’ve earned. It isn’t based on how tall or good looking we are. Gospel justice isn’t even based on how closely we’ve followed the rules. The good news, according to Jesus, is that we can gain power paradoxically by humbling ourselves before God, admitting that we’re sinners, and seeking God’s mercy.

Like the widow in the first parable, of course we have the right and responsibility to seek and pray for interpersonal and societal justice. But, when it comes to our own individual standing before God, the best place to begin is on our knees with our heads bowed. That doesn’t mean we should mess up on purpose, thinking there’s no use in trying hard or that we should all embrace sin because God will love and forgive us anyway. No. That’s not what I’m saying. Of course, God expects us to work to improve our lives in every way we possibly can. Of course, God expects us to do our best to live up to the ideals set forth in scripture. But so much of who we are is a given at birth, an accident and product of our nationality, family, genetics, and environment. So much of who we become is beyond our choosing or control. For us to take credit for that and to look down on others who didn’t enter life with the same opportunities and privileges isn’t justice. We need to recognize that, before God’s seeing eyes, we’re all lowly sinners in need of a great deal of grace. Our power comes not from exalting ourselves, but in humbling ourselves before God in prayer.

CONCLUSION

For our special music this morning, Nancy had us “Name that Hymn” and then she told us the story behind the hymn. I’ve got a mystery song and a story for you too. This song is one that both our

congregation and choir have sung before or after our prayers. The song was published in 1973. The lyrics and music were composed by a man named Ken Medema.

In the summer of 1978, I attended a Christian youth conference in which Ken Medema was the lead musician. He was fascinating to me. Ken was blind, and yet he was so incredibly talented. There was a lot of preaching at that youth event, and no matter what the preachers talked about, Ken Medema could immediately take a seat at the piano and improvise a wonderful song that went along with the sermon. Many of the songs in his now-large repertoire began as improvisations at events just like that.

At that 1978 youth conference I bought one of Ken's eight-track tapes. I played that tape over and over again until the tape broke. His songs about Christian faith were powerful to me. What I didn't know until later, though, was that before he became a full-time song-writer and performer, Ken worked as a musical therapist in a psychiatric hospital. His first songs were about the lives of his teenage mental health patients who were also suffering from severe problems like hunger, poverty, and homelessness. Medema wrote about how the charity and justice of Christian faith could help make people's lives better.

The mystery song's chorus is all we have in our United Methodist hymnbook. But Medema's song also has a verse that says

Something's gonna happen that the world has never known
When the people of the Lord get down to pray
A door's gonna swing open and the walls come a tumblin' down
When the people of the Lord get down to pray.

Have you figured out the song yet? OK, here's the title and chorus:

Lord, listen to your children praying.
Lord, send your spirit in this place.
Lord, listen to your children praying.
Send us love, send us power, send us grace. (Hope Publ., 1973)

For some of us who have prayed and prayed and prayed over what seem to be intractable problems, the power of justice seems elusive. But, in his parables, Jesus tells us to pray always and don't lose heart. And he tells us to humble ourselves before God. When we do those things, we'll find power in praying for justice.