



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

The Way of Endurance: Persevering in Hope

October 20, 2019

Text: Luke 18: 1-8

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 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?’

.Sermon:

Jesus said you ought to pray continuously and never faint. Jesus said in this world we ought to keep on praying until justice rolls down. Jesus said whatever you do—just don’t give up. Have endurance. Tanya Humphreys knows what it means to have endurance in the quest for justice. Just like that widow, she knows what it means to call for justice over and over again and to be ignored, because she cried out for justice—not for a day, not for a week or even a year, but for decades. Since she was a small child, like that judge we heard about this morning—no one seemed to listen to her at all.

Tanya’s father was a famous person; he was the founder of a group called Mercy Corps, located in Portland, Oregon. It is an organization whose stated mission is to alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive and just communities. They marshal thousands of volunteers to be a presence in those places in the world in need of desperate help. However, her father—the one who helped co-found that organization and helped write that very mission statement—did not exactly live up to that mission in his family life, and especially in the way he treated his daughter. He did things that violated her in many ways since she was a young child.

Tanya told her mother in the 1970’s. She told her friends and her school in the 80’s. In the 90’s she told her doctors, and together they even told Mercy Corps. Her story was backed up by countless medical reports of what had happened to her at the hands of her father, and not one of them did what the Lord commands. No one did justice; no one loved kindness, and

absolutely none of them planed love. And yet she kept speaking. In a recent interview she said that all along it felt like screaming behind soundproof glass. But she kept speaking because she hoped that eventually someone would listen; Tanya did not lose heart—just like the widow did not lose hope—just like the way Jesus tells us to live our own lives in this parable.

Keep praying—Jesus says. Pray continually, Jesus says. Don't lose heart even for a moment. Keep speaking out loud, for someone is always listening. God—Jesus said—is always listening. Don't give up or give in—that is the way Jesus calls us to live this morning—it is a way of endurance. And Jesus—Emmanuel, God with us—he just didn't advocate prayer because he knew it was the story of his faith tradition; he wasn't just drawing on what others had done before. Jesus knew about the power of prayer because he lived it.

To read Luke's Gospel, you cannot miss how central a role prayer is in Jesus' own life and ministry. Luke's Gospel is always about a Jesus who prays, a Jesus who seeks to get away from the crowds and the press of everyday life to find a quiet place to pray, and when he prays, something happens. He prays at all the big moments; he prays at beginnings and endings too. When he's trying to get his disciples to spread justice he prays and when the ultimate injustice is being done to him, he prays.

Since you may not have Luke memorized, let me remind you of some of those times. In the River Jordan, he prayed at his baptism, and Luke tells us that it is in the moment of his prayer that Jesus saw the very heavens open and a dove descend. It was while he was praying that Jesus heard God claim him as beloved. He prayed before selecting his disciples to make sure it was God's will and not his own choice getting in the way. In the story of the Transfiguration, while on the mountaintop—Luke is very clear that it was while Jesus was praying that he suddenly dazzled bright as the sun. It was after prayer that Jesus remembered the fullness of his mission, and, remember, that it was in the garden that he prayed to remember whose will it was that he was following. In fact, it was with his very last breath on Good Friday that he prayed his spirit into God's loving care.

Praying without ceasing is not just what Jesus tells us to do but what Jesus did. Luke is clear. Jesus prayed that he might be attuned to God—that he might not just bring the Good News but bring the very Kingdom of God so near. You see, prayer is powerful beyond our imagination. In this passage, which was brought to life so beautifully for us today—whether we call it the *Faithful Widow* or *Unjust Judge*—whether we identify with the widow or perhaps uncomfortably find more of the judge in us than we might like—the focus is on where our focus should be—open always to the still-speaking voice of God, open beyond our circumstances—holding onto hope even when it feels like we're yelling to God or to neighbor behind soundproof glass, pray without ceasing, Jesus says.

In this passage, we don't even know what injustice has been done to this widow. The Bible gives us plenty of examples of what might be happening, but the beauty of this passage is that Jesus leaves that injustice open, because it doesn't take a great deal of imagination for us to

recognize the injustice that seems to be all around us. Miguel de La Torre, ethics faculty member at the Iliff School of Theology, likens prayer and this moment of the widow to the experience of living on Holy Saturday—that day sandwiched between Jesus’ death on Good Friday and his resurrection on Sunday. In the church tradition, it is a day of absolute silence—where nothing is supposed to happen, and where the *rules* say we can’t even do something as life-giving as offer Communion. It is a day of sitting in liminal space—a day where we bring the known parts of our lives and the known parts of our world before God’s love—that an unknown new offer of life may spring forth.

Faith in uncertain times is the way of life that Jesus offers, and it is the way of stewardship too. Giving sacrificially in that liminal space, facing the challenges of our lives, the world and this church. We give, not fully knowing what new life will spring forth from those gifts, but we trust that when we pledge collectively—when we give—that new life will come forth miraculously just like it did on Easter Sunday and every day we draw breath. There is a great hymn “In the Midst of New Dimensions,” and it calls for us to sing these words in the final verse, “Should the threat of dire predictions cause us to withdraw in pain; May your blazing spirit resurrect the church again.” That is the active prayer; that is the act of stewardship, living in that liminal space, trusting that new miracles are about to burst forth.

This past week the stewardship committee mailed a letter and a pledge card, asking for your gifts of prayer, time and resources. As you contemplate your pledge this year in any of those areas, I hope that you do think of the widow and the injustice out there in the world that with our mission, we as a church are called to respond and be God’s love in the world. But even more, I hope you think about the widow because of how she goes about living and praying without ceasing—even after justice has been granted, she keeps right on praying—showing the kind of faith Jesus extols, keeping on, keeping on, calling out for justice and mercy. Jesus—Emmanuel, God with us—wasn’t content just to pray; he taught his disciples how to do it too. In fact, that prayer we prayed with the children was his answer when the disciples said, “Teach us how to pray.” But more than that, his final instruction to his disciples was to go to Jerusalem. Go to Jerusalem and then do what? Not heal, not build, not anything—but pray. Pray every day until the spirit comes down and the spirit will tell you what to do. Go and pray, is what Jesus says.

The act of prayer is what shaped the church of that generation, and I hope shapes the church of this generation into our calling to fullness of life, both lifting our concerns to God and also being those who hear, those who respond and those who partner with God in hope. The Presbyterian Church Declaration of Faith in the United States includes this:

We know our efforts cannot bring in God’s kingdom, but hope plunges us into the struggle, for victories over evil that are possible now in the world, in the church, and in our individual lives. Hope gives us courage and energy to contend against all opposition, however invincible that opposition may seem. For the new world and the new humanity that are surely coming.”

If you're bold enough to consider what that meant to the early church while you're thinking about your pledge—to those who knew and walked with Jesus, then read Acts 2: 43-47, and here's what it will tell you: in that early church everyone shared everything they had. Everyone invited everyone in and gave them a big hug and shared everything they had, and do you know what the next statement is? There was no one in need. Sharing everything in that church, justice and peace sprouted forth like love had been planted.

In that early church they weren't done—they kept on praying—so pray about your pledge. Pray about this church; pray for direction, guidance and courage. Pray for the resurrection of this church, even if as on that first Holy Saturday, you have no idea what that resurrection might look like or if the idea that occurs to you seems crazy, pray.

Denied justice so many times and left unheard every time, Tanya Humphreys kept speaking. Then, news reached her in October of 2018 that Mercy Corps had released a new code of ethics. She found her voice and told her story again to Mercy Corps, and once again they failed to listen, suggesting that it was a private matter involved her father who had died in 2005. So, what she did next was speak to the *Oregonian*, the newspaper who indeed listened to her. They research and then shouted her story to anyone who would listen. And Tanya will tell you that justice had not yet been done but is unfolding. But more than justice—she will tell you that something else happened. Chalk appeared on the sidewalks outside Mercy Corps. Written very large were these simple words: “We stand with you!” And Tanya went to see those words, and when she showed up outside the building, first one, and then two, and finally dozens of Mercy Corps employees came out to hug her, to apologize to her, to listen to her, and to reconcile with her. She described it more as a matter of shared grief than justice. She spoke of the kind of healing that brought her liberty. Sharing in grief and healing—enduring in these times until in God's good holy time all is healed, and resurrection becomes a reality—and not just to wait for after death but to partner in bringing about now while we still draw breath.

That's what Jesus calls faith. That's what we are called to do. That is why we ask you to pray about how you support this place of prayer—this place of endurance. Tanya's final words in that interview sounded to me just like the final words of Jesus. They were words of gratitude that were breathed out like a prayer. She simply said, “Thank you for hearing me.” That's all. May that simple prayer guide our life of prayer; may that bring us endurance and hope; may it open our ears and our hearts to live a prayerful life of power and justice.

Amen.



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor