

SERMON: Find Us Faithful

TEXT: Luke 18:1-8

I love to walk along the river, and this is the perfect time of year to do it. I love watching the water move, and I often imagine floating from Minnesota all the way down to Louisiana – preferably in a beautiful, old, paddlewheel riverboat! I love to watch the barges go by and listen while the waves they create gently lap up on the shore. I love the view looking north to a Midwestern mountain in the distance, and looking south to that beautiful bridge. The river is reliable and steady, always there, always moving. Though the waters rise and fall, the river is persistent and constant despite our ever-changing world.

The other thing I love about walking along the river is the rock sculptures along the shore. Someone is an artist and an engineer, creating stone towers by balancing the rocks on their smallest points. I am awed by the patience and perseverance demonstrated in these creations.

This artist must have a lot of time on his hands. In fact, I have seen him before, and I think he may be homeless. A wanderer, in any case.

And you may say that his work is futile, frivolous, serving no purpose. The mindless three-dimensional doodling of someone who is lazy or bored.

While he may be bored, he is certainly not lazy! First, he has to balance himself on the uneven surface of rocks and driftwood, chunks of concrete, and various pieces of litter. Then comes the work of bending and squatting, finding the rocks and then setting and adjusting them over and over and over again until they stand.

You may wonder, “Why does he do this?” What is the point? All that painstaking work for something that will likely be knocked down or destroyed by morning. Can’t he make better use of his time? Maybe if he put all that energy and talent into something worthwhile, he could make something of himself.

But I would argue that he *does* provide something worthwhile. His work is a lesson in patience and perseverance, a demonstration of clear focus and faithfulness to the task. His art is a form of prayer in my view, and it puts me in a prayerful frame of mind. Furthermore, it brings to life the words of scripture and the character of faith.

As we read from the Second Letter to Timothy: “I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”

I wonder, are we proclaiming the Good News of Jesus, persistently, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable? Whether or not anyone is paying attention? Are we patient in seeking to convince and encourage one another? Thanks to social media, we’ve become adept at rebuking one another, but we are sadly lacking in patience, and rarely is there any tone of encouragement in our words.

Then we read from the Gospel of Luke, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. It is not an unfamiliar situation, especially for parents or anyone who has experience in caring for children. Just as children are often masterful at wearing us down with their begging for a cookie or a new toy, the widow’s persistence eventually wears down the unjust judge. We can imagine her pounding on the door with both fists, while the judge throws up his hands and thinks, “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.”

Back at the beginning of this passage, Luke writes, “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” So, the widow in the story is the one who is in need and *praying* (as it were) for justice. But the one to whom she *prays* neither fears God nor respects people. For most of us, this metaphor is flawed, because an *unjust judge* is not an accurate representation of the God to whom we pray. The God we worship has great respect for his beloved children, and would never delay in helping us.

In fact, as Jesus concluded the parable, he said, “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.”

Well, there’s another problem. If God is eager to quickly grant justice to us, then why are we having to cry to him day and night? We have all persevered in prayer, only to have those prayers seem to fall on deaf ears.

And then that last line of the parable is the real kicker, as Jesus turns the tables on us: “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

You see, we have gotten caught up in the idea that God really is the unjust judge. That we have not received justice, even after crying day and night. That God does delay in helping us, despite our pounding on the door with both fists. That our prayers do fall on deaf ears.

But this is not about God or God's faithfulness. This is about us and whether we are faithful, and persistent, and patient. God has proven his faithfulness to us over and over and over again. Yet we continue to question it. It is we who need to prove our faithfulness to God. Jesus has bracketed this parable with that message: the parable is about *our* "need to pray always and not to lose heart." And "when the Son of Man comes, *will he find faith on earth?*"

And when our prayers are not answered in the way we hoped, does it mean that we didn't pray hard enough? That we weren't faithful enough? No. It means that God has already answered a prayer that has yet to be prayed.

You may be familiar with a website called Care Portal. I first learned about it when someone in my congregation asked prayers for their friends, whose infant was diagnosed with a serious heart defect. The parents were writing about their journey with this child on Care Portal – the treatments, the progress, the setbacks,

their fears and their hopes. Other friends and family could sign up to receive an email each time an update was posted. This saves the family from having to tell the story over and over again to all those who are asking.

Since then, I have followed people with severe injuries and cancer. Just recently, a friend from high school posted about his cancer and a new treatment he's trying. He asked for people to pray – not just a general prayer for healing – but he requested that prayers be very specific regarding the results he wanted.

I can certainly appreciate such a request, and I find nothing wrong with asking God for exactly what you want. On the other hand, I'm concerned that when we become so narrowly focused on a singular outcome, that we may miss the myriad of other ways that God might be working and answering the prayers that we haven't even thought to ask.

I believe that we learn from unanswered prayer. We learn about ourselves, and we learn about God. I believe that unanswered prayer can take us down a path that brings us closer to God, when we have to keep asking, when we have to keep pounding down that door, night after night.

The lesson Jesus teaches, that we should pray always and not lose heart, is a lesson about faith. Faith is persistent. Faith is patient. Faith perseveres.

Like the artist who builds the rock towers along the river. We cannot be frantic about it. We need to be focused and attentive. We need to be willing to adjust and readjust. We need to be open to more than one answer or one solution. We need to be grateful for small successes. And when our plans tumble to the ground, we need to see not failure, but an opportunity to try again.

I know a woman, now in her 80's, who has had a very difficult life. At one time, she had four children. She lost two of them before they were ten years old. Her husband died in his 60's, within weeks of being diagnosed with cancer. Then, her fifty-year-old daughter was found dead in her home. Her remaining daughter, the youngest, was married to a man who struggled with depression. One day, just weeks before Christmas, he stepped in front of a semi-truck. His own daughter was just 8 years old.

Despite the unimaginable loss this woman has suffered and the innumerable prayers gone unanswered, she has never stopped coming to church. She still attends regularly to this day, despite significant loss of hearing and sight.

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”

May we never lose heart. May the Lord FIND US FAITHFUL... to the glory of God!

AMEN.