The Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge… I like this parable… I’ll tell you one thing I like about it: Luke comes right out and tells us what it means before we even start reading it: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” +++ It’s the story of a widow who is fighting for justice – we aren’t told who her opponent is, or what kind of justice she’s asking for. All we know is the she is relentless. But, day after day, the judge casually dismisses her. But somehow, she keeps coming back. Justice is worth it to her. +++ Now, the judge is a different sort of character. He “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” He doesn’t really care one way or the other about justice – in fact, it seems there’s no good reason for him to deny her day after day. He just seems to be an entitled man who’s only real interest is looking out for people like himself. … But this widow is starting to make him look bad – she’s hurting his reputation – so, OK, finally, he gives her what she wants so she’ll go away. +++ As Luke promised, the widow gives us a lesson in the importance of persistent prayer – of “keeping at it” in the face of adversity. Does she remind you of anyone you know?… Someone who refuses to be discouraged in circumstances stacked against them?+++ Speaking for myself, I’m awed by single parents… When our girls were growing up, one of Emily’s best friends and her brother, were being raised by just her mom – I’ll call her Cora… You know, Linda and I are a married couple – two people – and our daily schedule would wear us out, just about every day – we’d both be tired after a long workday, and then we’d have to drive the kids here and there for after school-sports and extracurriculars, piano lessons, church activities, and friends’ houses – plus get dinner on the table – then think about our own commitments, like Session, Deacon, and committee meetings at church – we made sure homework got done – so everybody could go to bed and start over tomorrow. ((I know – right now, most of you are nodding your heads, thinking, “I’ve been there, I’ve done that.” Or, “that’s my life right now.”)) +++ And sometimes, in the middle of all that, I’d think about Cora – she also worked fulltime and had two kids at home – they were just as involved in activities as our girls. Cora always showed up when she was expected – usually early. Her kids were always prepared – always polite. And always in church. +++ And she did it alone. +++ I marvel at single parents like Cora – her persistence, her positivity, and her faith are inspiring. That singular sense of purpose. +++ Cora is the one the persistent widow reminds me of… Does she remind you of someone you know – or is she, perhaps, a bit like you, yourself? … Never giving up?… Going back day after day, despite all the odds? Refusing to give up?…

So is that the entire message of the parable? “Be like the persistent widow – bring your prayers to God and don’t lose heart?”+++ (If only Luke – and Jesus were that easy to pin down.) +++ The problem is, as that message sinks in, it’s unsettling, isn’t it?… So… are we supposed to harass God… wear the Lord down with our prayers until we get an answer, just to shut us up?+++ Well, no, God isn’t really represented by the unjust judge – remember, Jesus says God, who loves you, IS NOT like the judge, who “neither feared God nor had respect for people,” +++ But… if the parable promises that God always give quick and positive response to prayer – “your wish is my command”: – our own life experience tells us that’s just not true, either.+++ (All of sudden this simple parable – that promised to be so straightforward – is getting hard.) +++ When I pray, I always feel heard – but I know I can’t expect an immediate answer. Even my most burning and persistent prayers: – for an end to suffering, for peace, for healing… – they often go unresolved – and, as far as I can tell – unanswered for reasons I can’t understand. Is that your experience, as well?+++ So, the danger of over-simplifying the parable into a promise for quick action – the danger is, we could get very disappointed, very quickly – and start getting an uncomfortable sense that God IS, actually, like the judge:: when our prayers aren’t answered, we’d conclude that the Lord is oblivious to their urgency – and denying or delaying justice for no good reason.

+++++++ ++++

So, if it’s more than that, what IS going on in the parable?? Well, to figure that out, we have to remember that Jesus’ parables are about US – about how WE live in the world – about how WE treat each other – how WE respond to God – and how we live our lives. We have more to learn from the persistent widow about our lives of faith… more than simple lessons like “pray more” and you’ll get what you need. So let’s think about it a little more closely… The parable begins by telling us not to lose heart. In her commentary on this passage, Deb Thomas asks, “What does it look like to ‘lose heart’ in our spiritual lives? The words that come to mind are weariness, resignation, numbness, and despair. [When I lose heart], I lose clarity and begin to doubt God’s intentions. I get irritable and cynical very quickly. My spiritual GPS goes haywire, and all roads lead to nowhere… In contrast, the widow in Jesus’ parable is the very picture of purposefulness, precision, aliveness, and clarity. She knows her need, she knows its urgency, and she knows exactly where to go and whom to ask in order to her need met. If anything, the daily business of getting up, getting dressed, heading over to the judge’s house or workplace, banging on his door, and talking his ear off until he listens fortifies her own sense of who she is and what she’s about… There is nothing vague or washed out about this bold, plucky woman who drives that apathetic judge nuts with her demands. She lives in Technicolor, here and now: ‘Give me justice! I will not shut up until you do.’”+++ Thomas asks us to consider: “What happens when we pray like the widow?… I can only speak from experience, but I know that when I persist in prayer – really
persist, with a full heart, over a long period of time – something happens to me. My sense of who I am, to whom I belong, what really matters in this life, and why – these things mature and solidify. My heart grows stronger. It becomes less fragile and flighty… And sometimes – here’s the biggest surprise – these… things happen even when I don’t receive the answer I’m praying for.” These are the same changes that take place in the widow – before she finally gets justice. The struggle itself changes her. +++ +++ And yes – it’s bewildering when our deepest prayers seem to go unanswered. It hurts and it’s discouraging. “But maybe that’s the [real] message of the parable… the work of prayer is hard. The widow’s predicament is not straightforward; she has to make a costly choice every single day… ‘Will I keep asking?’ ‘Dare I risk humiliation one more time?’ ‘Do I still believe that my request is worthy of articulation?’ ‘Can I be patient?’ ‘Am I still capable of trusting that justice can happen?’”

Finally, Thomas concludes, “Prayer is… a great mystery. We can’t know – it’s not given to us to know- why some prayers are answered quickly and many others are not. We can’t understand why our earnest pleas for justice (or healing, or peace) hit the wall of God’s silence and sometimes remain there for weeks, months, years, or lifetimes.” +++ But, the parable asks, will we remain oriented to God, anyway? Will we respond to the Lord who is alive within us? When life in this fallen world threatens to crush us – to make us numb – to take away our empathy for other people::: will we wrestle with it as people of faith – will we keep showing up?? +++ THAT, my friends, is what Christ is really asking us here! :: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” +++ When I return, Jesus asks, “Will I find faith [alive] on earth?... Will I find people like this bothersome widow? Will I find such [unflinching] ferocity?... Such tenacity?... Such fortitude” as in this widow seeking justice? +++ +++ We turn our hearts to God in prayer – we make specific pleas about suffering,… about violence, … about IS God even in a foreign land. Now, in our final week with Jeremiah, we find the “beginning of the end.” ::::

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+++++++++++++++ ++++++++

To show up and AND the Body of Christ in this world. And his work is done through our ++ +++++ +++++ +++++ +++++ +++++ +++++ +++ In the face of the world that turns away from God and assaults us every day, the letter calls us to “always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.” And, we have all the tools we need: “from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” so the writer urges us: “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience.”

+++++++ ++++

Jeremiah also shows us a future when God’s people can turn to the Lord with confidence to change the world – a time that could be our own. We’ve been walking with Jeremiah for about two months now, and we know his world was just as dangerous and heart-breaking as our own – we shared his desperate warnings as Babylon’s invasion drew near, when its soldiers marched on Jerusalem, and his lament at the devastation they left behind – reminding Israel they are still God’s people, even in a foreign land. Now, in our final week with Jeremiah, we find the “beginning of the end.” :::: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant… The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah…I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts…” +++ THE GOOD NEWS IS, YOU are now so empowered with God’s truth,… within you… +++ You are fortified by God’s covenant – in your heart – at a time when you need it the most. +++ Jeremiah never sugarcoats the suffering realities of this world – and neither does Jesus. This fallen world… is a place of injustice… it’s not fair… +++ Like the judge in our parable: this world neither fears God nor has respect for God’s people. +++ But like the widow,… like Cora raising children alone… we are called to be persistent – +++ to transform ourselves with tenacious prayer – to lift up our needs to Christ, and do it again tomorrow… and the next day… +++ We are called to demand justice today, and do it again tomorrow… and the next day. +++ We are called to proclaim the gospel to a world with “itching ears,” and also do that again tomorrow… and the next day… And to trust the Lord’s eternal wisdom… - and love. +++

We, God’s People, the Church,… ARE the Body of Christ in this world. And his work is done through our persistent prayer AND – through our showing up to wrestle with injustice – grapple with suffering – cry out over hunger – mourn violence – and face down evil today, and to do it all again tomorrow… and again the next day… until he comes again.

++++++++++++++++++++++ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.