

## FINDING FAITH

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

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October 20, 2019

TEXT: Luke 18:7-8 “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?”

PURPOSE: To encourage us to practice the faith God has given us through persistent prayer and action geared toward realizing God’s dreams for us and for the world.

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Today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke recounts a parable Jesus told concerning a widow bringing her cause to the attention of an uncaring judge. Even though the judge kept on refusing to adjudicate her case, she was so persistent that she eventually wore out the judge, and he granted her justice.

The point Jesus is making is that, if our persistence can get an unjust judge to respond, how much more will a gracious, caring God pay attention to our prayers?

That sounds great, except the experience of many people is that God seems as unresponsive to our prayers as was the judge to the appeals of the widow. How many of us have long lifted up prayers for healing, for justice, for strength, and nothing seems to change? The prophet Habakkuk, whose lament we heard in worship two Sundays ago, prayed: “How long, Lord, shall I cry to you for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, “Violence!” and you will not save? (Habakkuk 1:2) Too long, the answer appears to be, or at least, longer than I should have to. The story of the widow is just a parable, but real widows in Jesus’ day were routinely denied justice. Did this parable increase the resolve to be persistent or add to the feeling of futility for the real widows who may have been among those who heard Jesus tell it? Same for us: does this parable move us to intensify the urgency of our pursuit of justice, or does it have us wondering if it’s worth it to keep trying?

What we wish, perhaps even what we expect, especially with Jesus right in this passage assuring his hearers that God will “quickly grant justice” to God’s people, is that, upon hearing our fervent prayer, God will say, “Oh, yes, thanks for calling this to my attention. I’ll get to it right away.” At least we think God would be as good as a decent help center, and we’d hear, “Thank you for your prayer. Your concern is important to us. All God’s associates are busy helping others. Please stay on the line; your prayers will be answered in the order in which they were received.” But when we put in a call to heaven, we don’t even get that. So it is understandable when persistence deteriorates to resignation, when urgency fizzles into apathy, and God begins to look more like the uncaring judge than a loving parent.

That's where Jesus' big question comes in: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself. After the risen Christ ascended into heaven, the earliest Christians expected him to quickly return and assert his sovereign rule over all the world. By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, it had been as much as fifty years since the Son of Man had walked this earth. How long, indeed? And what kind of faith could hold out longer than a lifetime? The big question isn't whether Jesus gets high marks on the customer satisfaction survey, but rather, will Jesus find people faithfully persisting in their relationship with God, whether or not God is addressing our needs on our schedule.

Today, along with other congregations of the United Church of Christ in New Hampshire and of the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe, we are celebrating our Ukama, specifically with the Ivene congregation in the city of Gweru. Ukama is a relationship of mutuality between churches here and in Zimbabwe which is blessed by the gifts of its various partners. The more anyone gets into it, the more it feels like family. We have resources to share with our partners in Zimbabwe; they have resources to share with us. Often, the resources we offer are more of a material nature. Just the same, the resources they offer are more of a spiritual nature. One example: it's hard to find a teenager in a New Hampshire United Church of Christ. When Lindy and I last visited Zimbabwe in 2015, we attended the annual meeting of the UCCZ Youth Fellowship in which 1500 young people overcome amazing difficulties just to get there spent a weekend singing, learning, and listening to four hour-long sermons. We absolutely have a great deal to learn from our partners there about shaping the next generation of Christians.

One thing for sure about our family in Zimbabwe: they get the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow. It is the story of their life. Ever since the war to overcome the white racist government in the 1970's, they've been persisting in efforts to secure justice and wellbeing that are nothing short of amazing. Our own partner church, the Ivene congregation, was founded as a church in 2012, a planting of the Gweru Church. They designed a facility with a large sanctuary, a youth space, a children's educational wing, and toilets, and almost immediately built the youth space and adjoining toilets. They've been worshiping in that youth space since then, and slowly, persistently, raising the sanctuary. We tolerated

worshiping in the Friendship House for six months while our church building was being renovated. They've been worshiping in a cramped, unfinished space for six years. They've done it in a country that's faced devastating multi-year droughts, overwhelming unemployment, rampant inflation, and political repression. Connie Littlefield, a woman from New Hampshire who spends a lot of time in Zimbabwe, recently posted this information on Facebook:

"A loaf of bread was \$9 yesterday, now \$15.

A jar of jam was \$8, now \$17. Sugar went from \$20 for 2 kg to \$29.

The cornflakes are "on promotion"...2 boxes for \$64.99.

Who is buying the candy bar at 18.99?"

Can you imagine fundraising under those circumstances?

The persistence of our partners is not a denial of the difficult situation in their country. Every message we get from them takes note of the challenges they are facing. But somehow they manage not to throw in the towel. Ask them how, and the answer will always include two things: trust in God, made concrete in prayer and praise, and the support and encouragement of a community of faith. That's an answer that has value anywhere in the world, under any kind of circumstances. It's an answer we're learning to embrace here.

This is where we need to move beyond the particulars of the widow story. That story paints a picture of one person persisting in her quest for justice all on her own. That approach, in real life, is doomed to failure. Every long-pursued quest for justice has been sustained in community. Every individual's fervent prayer finds power when a community shares the prayer. Jesus asked, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith. The place he'll find it is in a community of faith, a group of people taking care of each other, sharing each other's joys and sorrows, encouraging each other's growth in grace, and being caught up in a common mission. We know about this. There have been prayers lifted up here for the same people, for the same concerns, for many months. There have been times when our prayer has followed Habakkuk's lead, with us wondering, how long, Lord, will you not answer when we cry? Could it be that we don't give up on our praying by the fact that this community has shared the prayers we brought here as individuals? I think so. On our own, the concerns voiced in our prayers would still concern us. But how persistent could we be in taking those concerns to God in prayer if we were not experiencing the shared concern of a faithful community?

I said that the persistence of our friends in Zimbabwe is sustained both by prayer and by praise. Prayer is lifting up our hopes and hurts to a God whom we believe is paying attention. Praise is affirming God's might and mercy. Praise is acting as if what we're asking for has already come true. When folks from New Hampshire visit our partner churches in Zimbabwe, the thing we notice most is the power of their praise in worship. It is as if, the more intense the distress, the more vigorous the praise. That's because praise is the most effective nurturer of persistence. Praise overcomes resignation and overthrows apathy. And praise, for sure, is something that almost always has to be offered in community.

Jesus' vision was not for individuals to have a private relationship with him. Our salvation is personal, but it's not a private matter. His vision was for people coming together in community to share his life. That's where faith is not only found; that's where it's taught, and nourished, and passed along. His vision is made real in every local church, but it's made even more real when we find ourselves in wider expressions of his community of faith. That's the blessing of our Ukama – it reminds us that we are part of something much larger than we can see, a global community nurturing faith, and mutual support, and persistence in our efforts to seek the kingdom of God.

There is a world out there trapped in stubborn injustice. There are lives right here overwhelmed with challenges that won't let up. What's wrong with the world, what's distressing in our lives, will not be fixed by the wave of a magic wand. The mending of creation, the healing of our lives, calls for a stubborn persistence that doesn't give up, even if the injustice appears to be firmly entrenched, even if the distress appears to have taken up permanent residence. Thank God that the persistence we need to muster is gifted to us in communities which gather in Jesus' name. Thank God that this holy persistence is stronger than any injustice or distress the world can dish out. Thank God that God is the God who does grant justice to those who pray to God day and night.