

“WILL HE FIND FAITH ON THE EARTH?”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Luke 18:1-8

For the last two weeks, we have learned along with the disciples as Jesus has taught about faith. And what we have learned, in essence, is that we are not made “Christian” by the amount of faith we have, but by a faith that is focused on God and lived out in gratitude to God and others. Now, we pick up today as Jesus continues his teaching about faith. But as he closes out this parable admittedly strange parable, Jesus raises a question: *“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

That’s some kind of question, isn’t it? Actually, we might even be tempted to go so far as to call it a loaded question. The disciples have longed for more faith, and Jesus told them all that is required is faith the size of a mustard seed. Out of ten healed lepers, only one returned to be truly saved through his faith lived out in gratitude. And now we have this story of a widow, ceaselessly seeking justice against her adversary, even to the point of pestering. We are to understand that this is the kind of faithful persistence the Son of Man hopes to find when he comes to earth; and so we must ask ourselves, are we so persistent?

What Jesus wants us to hear today is that humanity’s well-being depends on God and God’s righteous work in the world. Just like the widow with no means of support, no husband, no inheritance, no social standing, whose well-being depends upon achieving justice over her adversary. So it is that we, like the widow, should persist in prayer, seeking justice, peace, and mercy for all; just as the widow persisted in seeking justice from the judge.

But before we delve into this parable and all that it says to us, let me first offer a word of caution. Jesus is not telling us that we should just pray for whatever we want and expect that eventually God will give in to our desire. We can’t start asking for a Lamborghini every hour on the hour and expect that if, like the widow,

we persist day in and day out, God will ultimately deliver to us the fiery red sports car of our dreams. That's not the way God works, not even close. And so we have to remember that the issue here is justice, not simply using God to get what we want or even what we think we need.

Yet, that raises another question in and of itself, doesn't it? What happens when we are not praying for ourselves, but seeking God's justice and God's will, and still bad things continue to happen all around us? It happens all the time, doesn't it? We hammer away at God's door to no avail. A mother with young children is diagnosed in the advanced stages of cancer, and so we pray and pray and pray, but death comes anyway. We are busy lifting up prayers for the victims of an elementary school shooting in Connecticut, when a massive tornado strikes Moore, Oklahoma. Broadcasts bring news of more war casualties, even though we continually pray for peace. Is this really the way it's supposed to be? Why is it that even when we persistently pray for God's will and according to God's way, we are still let down? What hope is Jesus offering?

I have to tell you, in all honesty, that I really don't have a great answer to that question. There's no good reason that you would pray for healing for two people fighting against terminal illness, and one would live and the other die. It doesn't make sense at all. But I think Jesus still has a message of hope for us within this parable. Indeed, we may be weary of praying without any sign of relief. And yet, our world can still be a better place, can't it? So, Jesus says, keep praying. Keep seeking God's kingdom, and God's righteousness, and God's justice; keep praying for this world to be a better place.

And that's where this element of faith comes in, I believe. Because when you've prayed and prayed and prayed for good things to come, but all the news is bad, it sure does take a lot of faith to keep on praying, doesn't it? That's why Jesus asks this question, *"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"* Jesus knows that we deal with so much bad stuff in our lives, but the sign of true faith is that we continue to seek the good through it all, we continue to seek God through it all. And that's what our Savior is looking for; faith and hope in God's goodness and mercy no matter what!

And we truly can have faith in God's complete goodness. God is so persistently in love with all of humanity. And God's love for all of us and his whole creation is so unshakable that we can trust in God to bring about justice. We can be certain that God hears our prayers, our crying day and night, even though we may not yet see any results. God has not forgotten us, though at times it may feel like it. Of course, we grow impatient, and we lose hope. How could we not? The world we live in is so far from the world Christians have been praying for since Jesus first appeared. As famed preacher Fred Craddock puts it, "All we know in the life of prayer is asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting."

That's why persistence in faithful prayer is so important. We may not have seen all the results we had hoped to accomplish through prayer, but we have seen some, haven't we? We've seen enough miracles in this world to know of God's own persistent love in Christ, and so we too must persist, even when it feels as if we are getting nowhere.

With football season now in full swing, it brings to mind a well-known running back. Now, I'm not a Dallas Cowboys fan at all, but I have always appreciated Emmitt Smith. Back in 2002, Emmitt set the NFL career rushing record at 16,743 yards. By the end of his career, that number had climbed to 18,355 yards. Now, Emmitt Smith was never as flashy as Walter Payton or Barry Sanders, and he never possessed true break-away speed. But his strength lies in his ability to persist—he just kept on running.

As I mentioned, when Emmitt took the all-time NFL rushing record, he had run for 16,743 yards. That's 9.5 miles! It took him 13 years to run only 9.5 miles. What's the big deal about that? We often run or walk more miles in the span of a few days or a week. Well, the big difference is, we don't have 11 huge defensive players trying to take our heads off when we run! Emmitt's average run over those 9.5 miles was 4.3 yards at a time. That means he had been tackled and knocked down somewhere around 3,983 times. And do you know what he did after every tackle? He got back up and ran the ball again. Sure, he was injured a few times, but he always returned. I'm impressed that someone would be knocked down almost 4,000 times and still they get up and run again.

Even the best of us gets knocked down in life. We will face difficult circumstances that trip our feet out from under us. The poor widow in Jesus' parable had been knocked flat, but she refused to stay down. She got up and with unhindered faith, persistently made her request to the judge.

And that's what we must do as well. This world is crooked, and broken, and hurting; and that affects people every day. But there is a time when everything will be put right, and that's what we are praying for. Do you remember how Jesus began the telling of this parable? Luke tells us that *"Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."*

Do you see what Jesus is getting at? He's saying that the world is broken; he's acknowledging that we will have trouble. But through this parable, he's also telling the disciples and us that if we persevere in Christ, things will be put right! *"However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"* Will we have prayed continually? We will have not given up?

A time is coming when all evil will be done away with. The joy will be so great that this life and the pain we are experiencing now will be forgotten. The young children who lost their mother to cancer will be reunited with her, and she will be whole and healthy. There will be no more war. Never again will the starving be hungry. Never again will the parched thirst. There will be no more tears or crying, for God himself will *"wipe away every tear from [our] eyes."* There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and God will dwell among us!

In the meantime, we are called to be faithful; to *"pray continually and not to be discouraged."* Bad things are going to happen in this life. We will not get everything we pray for, and we will not understand everything. In John 16: 33, Jesus tells us: *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* Will we continue to push forward when we have been knocked down? Will we continue to meet together? Will we persist in prayer? Will we put our faith in Christ? Will He find us faithful?