

Never Lose Heart: *Luke 18:1-8*

Norwalk Christian Church, May 2, 2015, Year B, Eastertide 5 (diverted from lectionary)

For those who are fans of the T.V. show “Big Bang Theory”, perhaps you, like me, imagine the persistent widow in Jesus’ story to be a lot like Sheldon, knocking, incessantly... annoyingly on his neighbor’s front door, repeating her name over and over again...knock knock--Penny!--knock, knock--Penny!--knock-knock--Penny!

Sheldon’s tactics are annoying, if not also hilarious, but you can’t argue with their effectiveness. If the goal is to convince Penny to open the door, it works--every time.

For those of you unfamiliar with Sheldon and Penny, that’s okay. You don’t need this pop culture reference to connect with the characters in this story. It’s really a perfect story, isn’t it? Almost kind of cute. Some have suggested this parable is Jesus’ attempt at a little humor.

The protagonist is this poor, I’m assuming old, widow woman, and she’s ancient...much older than the oldest person in this room. You can picture her, can’t you, with her cane, stooped, slowly creeping up the stairs to the judge’s chambers. Her hair is in a bun, bobby pins sticking out. Her faded denim dress goes down to her ankles. Every day, she makes the climb up these stairs, and everyday the Judge can see her climbing...and climbing...and climbing. When she finally gets to the top, she shuffles her orthopedic shoes into his chamber, where a crowd is always gathered waiting their turn to see the judge.

But this isn’t a woman who waits her turn. She needs justice now. She stands at the back of the crowd, taunting the judge. “Hey Judge! Give me justice!” She starts off quiet, but gets louder and louder. “Hey, Judge! I said, Give me justice!” “Who do you think you are, sitting in your self-righteous chair. Knock, knock--Judge--knock, knock--Judge. Give me justice!”

This woman...wow! She’s a fighter. Jesus calls her persistent, because all the good fighters are persistent. Because she knows what’s at stake. See, when your world is coming to an end...when you can see the end in sight, you don’t have the luxury of apathy or inaction or laziness.

Had we read the verses that immediately preceded this cute little story today, as Luke surely intended for his readers to do, then we would already have the end of the world in mind. Before our text is a section of scripture often ignored, but would be a great text to read over the loudspeaker at a haunted house. It’s a bit terrifying.

At the end of Luke 17, just steps away from our text today, Jesus warns of the end of days. Not the literal last days--the end of time--but about all the last days that come to

us in life, when we feel the world crashing in on us.

The text reads: “For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. It will be like the days of Noah...It will be like the days of Lot. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it. But those who lose their life will keep it.” Terrifying.

Upon hearing these troubling words, Jesus’ disciples ask him, “Where, Lord?” You can hear the terror in their voices. And Jesus’ answer only makes things worse, sending chills up our bones. “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

Not long ago, we were with Jesus’ disciples on Good Friday when they saw a corpse hanging from the cross, as they fill their world crashing in around them. For fear of being eaten alive by the gathering vultures, we saw them hide away behind locked doors, afraid Jesus’ fate will soon be theirs. It may not have been the end of the world, but it sure felt like it. Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

Now you see why we normally skip right over this text and move onto this cute, funny parable about the persistent widow. It’s terrifying. But in skipping over the doom and gloom, we miss the point.

That’s probably why read this parable simply as a call to persistent prayer, told to the comfortable. Like Dory from Finding Nemo, we leave this story singing, “Just keep praying, just keep praying, just keep praying, praying, praying.” But this text...this text is about the end of the world!

Okay, well, maybe not the end of the world, but that’s not what this widow thinks. Her world is coming to an end, and if she is going to survive, it’s because this crummy judge chooses to finally act on her behalf.

We don’t know what it is that has happened to her, but we can take a good guess. In a patriarchal society that saw women as property of men, a widow had little to no worth on her own. If she need injustice, there was nothing she could do on her own. Yet, this woman takes matters into her own hands, showing up before a judge that she was not supposed to see. Her mere presence is scandalous enough, even before she starts nagging the judge. She is an unrelenting woman stepping into a man’s world, demanding that this man do something about her fate.

If the widow is the perfect protagonist, the judge is the perfect antagonist. He’s just rotten. We are told by Jesus, and the judge freely admits, that he has no fear of God and no respect for anyone. We’ve met people like this before, but they’re usually not so brazen about it. They usually wrap their despicableness in a shroud of faith as they feign concern for the poor and suffering. But not this judge. He’s got no time for games. You

can almost hear him let out that stereotypical bad-guy laugh, “Bwaaahaha.”

Had we been there, watching this interminable woman shuffling to the courthouse day after day, we would’ve told her she’s wasting her time. “Give up!” we would’ve said. You can’t trust the political process. Those judges are no good. Just go home and pray about it. And just when we’ve written this woman off as one more casualty in the uphill battle against injustice, her story takes an interesting turn.

Her tactics, as unorthodox as they are, start to work. Her daily taunting of the judge is wearing him down. Finally, he reacts. In the NRSV which we just read, the judge says, “Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

But I like how the Message translation puts it. “I’d better do something and see that she gets justice--otherwise I’m going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.”

The word translated “wear me out”, is actually a boxing term. She’s not just wearing this judge out. Her persistent, incessant calls for justice are like uppercuts to his jaw. She’s bruising his pride, over and over again, and so he responds, not out of concern for her cause, but out of concern for his reputation: “I’d better do something-- otherwise I’m going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.”

So what do we do with this parable? Maybe we should simply make it a parable about prayer, and move on. After all, Luke began the parable by saying, “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” So, there you go. It’s about prayer. Amen, let us sing.

But if we are going to say it is about prayer, one thing we can’t do is make God out to be this judge. Jesus is very clear about this. This judge is a jerk. Rotten to the core. Yet even he, after being worn down by this woman’s persistence, gives her justice. But God is better than this. Will God delay in giving his people justice? I tell you, Jesus says, God will quickly grant justice to them!

Don’t leave this text today with any notion that God is like this judge. Jesus is not telling us to keep on knock, knock, knocking on heaven’s door, until we annoy God enough that God gives us what we want. That is not the lesson.

So what can we learn from this persistent woman? A woman who doesn’t do what she’s told. A woman who goes where she doesn’t belong, and uses the only tool she has in her fight for justice...her ability to persistently annoy this judge.

“Pray and don’t lose heart!” Jesus says. When you’re facing the end of your world, it’s easy to lose heart. But don’t give up! Be persistent. Bang on the doors of injustice. Climb the stairs of power. Do whatever it is you gotta do. The rules don’t apply here.

Over the last few months, we've heard a lot about breaking rules. As protests broke out in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, people, long oppressed and trapped in systemic poverty, have broken the rules. They've taken to the streets, some violently, most peacefully, persistently calling for justice.

Maybe you're like me, though. You see all that is wrong with the world...it's a mess. But what are *we* going to do? There is so much to do, where would *we* even start? It's easy to make excuses or pass blame. Easier still to sit back behind stained glass and computer screens, as we make a statement for or against whatever is going on in the world, and go back to life as normal. What else can we do?

Jesus ends his sweet, funny parable by asking his disciples, and probably all of us: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

That question hits a little close to home, because Jesus is not asking, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find *believers* on earth." He's not asking if the church will still be here in Norwalk, with full pews and offering plates. He is asking if he will find faith. Faith like this woman's faith.

Will he find persistence? Will he find fighters against injustice? Persistent women and men of God, who do not simply make statements and offer prayers, but get up off their knees, putting their prayers into action.

Faith is standing up to the lies that you're not good enough, that you can't do anything about the situation that you're in. Faith is fighting...fighting for justice. Fighting for your life. Fighting for your kids. Fighting for your marriage.

Faith is standing with those run over by injustice, with the the widow, and the mothers grieving the death of their sons, and all the victims of injustice, never letting them knock on the doors of justice alone.

Faith is breaking the rules for the sake of justice. Faith is being undignified in the presence of oppressive power. Faith is standing up, even though your knees may be knocking and the lightning is flashing and the vultures are gathering.

It may feel like it's the end of the world, but the faithful keep on fighting, breaking the rules if they must, beating the face of injustice black and blue, until God's kingdom comes on earth, as it is in heaven.

So church, let us be prayers. But let us also be fighters. Let us be persistent in the face of injustice. And may we never lose heart. **Amen? Amen.**

Let us now prepare to commune with one another and with our Lord, as we sing "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying."