

God's Persistence ... and Ours

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Gates Presbyterian Church

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Jeremiah 31:27-34, Luke 18:1-8 and 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

What an interesting if not intriguing combination of readings from Scripture! We have Jeremiah, six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, prophesizing on God's behalf that one day people would "get it" ... to the point that no one would have to teach God's ways anymore, that God's ways would be so imprinted on everyone's hearts and minds that the grace, love and hope of God would resonate in every person's word and deed. Then we have Paul, in his final instructions to Timothy, warning that people will have "itching ears," that people will turn *from* God's truths to whatever truth they want to embrace. Between those two, we heard in the Gospel Lesson a story about a widow who was so persistent in her demand for justice that the judge, to finally silence her, grants her wishes. That is then contrasted with our God Who grants us justice not because we are persistent in seeking it but because God is persistent in laying claims on us and our lives.

Thank God for God's persistence! Where would we be if the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses, David and Jeremiah, the God of the Old and New Testaments were not God persistent in trying to find us, cajole us, shake us from our complacencies and invite us to dream God's dreams, share God's hopes and live in God's ways.

Some of the most poignant words in today's readings are found in 2 Timothy – when Paul reminded his younger protégé to keep the faith – to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to convince and encourage God's people, to be patient in all things and to carry out the ministry to which Timothy knew he was called.

Some of the last words I just read from Paul's letter include a call to Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist." That word is, appropriately, spelled with a lower case "e" – for the word evangel simply means "good news" and an evangelist is one who "brings good news." None of us should shy away from proclaiming the good news, the gospel. We are indeed to be evangelists. It may be true that the word Evangelical with an upper case "E" has come to have a more narrow definition, but we need to reclaim a *good* word and the glad tidings that are ours in proclaiming God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Indeed, the word Evangeliche is the German word for Protestant, one who is in favor of, pro-, the testament of God in Jesus Christ, that new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke so long ago.

Were we to only rely on a human response, might we not scratch our heads when we read Jeremiah's prophecy as found in the 31st chapter of his book? If all of his other prophecies came true in real time *and* speak of realities that might come about in our time, when exactly did this prophecy come about in history? When, for the sake of a loving God, has there *ever* been a time when God's law was written on peoples' hearts and souls to the point that no one needed to be taught anymore? To be sure, Jesus is the *new covenant*, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise that laws *could* go from being written on tablets of stone to being lived out in peoples' lives as naturally as blood flows through their arteries and veins – but are we not still waiting for the fulfillment of the promise to occur – at least on a universal and global level? It is true that

the prophecy recorded in Jeremiah can be interpreted to speak to us as individuals – and in that respect, the message is always timely – for the grace of God comes to us and lifts us up from our complacencies, our worries, our weariness – and promises us hope – no matter what. That is part of the good news of Jesus Christ.

But – there always seems to a “but” – but, despite the promise of God’s persistent presence and love, there are words of concern if not admonishment to be found in these lessons from Scripture. After we read that the judge, weary of the widow’s clamoring for justice, grants her wishes and how that is juxtaposed with the promise that we don’t need to wait for God to grant us justice, the passage ends with a somewhat unsettling question. Listen to the two final verses of that reading from Luke’s eighth chapter:

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?*

Our response might be: we need to be careful for what we ask. If we ask for justice, we might just get it – and getting what we truly deserve might be more than just unsettling. How quickly we want others to face the consequences of their words and actions, but how anxious are we to really “face the music” for our shortcomings, those times when we have said one thing and done another, claimed to preach the good news and done otherwise, said that we believe in God’s ways of hope and grace but then demonstrated how quickly we fall back on human motivations and desires?

We go back to the widow who demanded justice. Whereas we might get caught up with the judge’s lack of compassion, it is important to understand the status of women and in particular widows in Jesus’ time. The best way to put it is that a widow had *no* status. She did not inherit a deceased husband’s property or wealth. Instead, she was at the mercy of her sons or her husbands’ brothers – or whoever the closest *male* relative was – and if that man was selfish or uncaring or lacking in compassion, well, she was just plain out of luck. Her only alternative was to seek justice from a judge – and it is no small matter to reiterate that in Jesus’ day, the judges were – well, men – some of whom might very well have inherited from a father or uncle or brother at the expense of a widow.

So the story about the widow seeking justice from the judge might very well be about persistence on her part – and is mirrored in the persistence that God has in loving us and the persistence we might have in seeking God’s truths for our lives, but this is also a message about hope and faith – about not losing heart, about striving for justice in our lives – and for others – no matter the obstacles that society or human protocol and expectations put in our way.

Imagination is not my strong suit, so I confess I was obtuse at a church conference where at one of the tables, the conference leaders were handing out pins that were pink pigs with wings. The banner read – “Pigs are flying!” OK, ... these little pigs are flying. ... Oh, finally noticing that it was a table with materials about peace and justice, I get it, Christians believe peace *is* possible, Christians believe the work of peacemaking will change the world, Christians want to proclaim the word, that being evangelists they can impact peoples lives – and their own. Even though the callous and pessimistic in our midst claim that peace will happen “when pigs fly,” that the Word of God will be written on peoples’ hearts “when pigs fly,” that justice for all of God’s people

will happen “when pigs fly,” that the ways of grace and hope and love and forgiveness and new starts will prevail “when pigs fly,” Christians live as though those very same pigs are a-flying. The message is that to be a Christian is to believe that the time has come when “pigs fly,” when hope is not in vain, justice and peace are more than possible, they are reachable, and when God’s persistence is mirrored in the words and deeds of God’s people, all things are possible.

Back to the realist, visceral, no-imaginative Ralph: pigs are not about to grow wings and fly – but that isn’t the point is it? The point is that God never gives up on us – any of us – and God through Christ and with the power of the Holy Spirit will point us in the ways of grace, show us the ways of justice, join us in embracing the ways of peace and in all things show us a persistent love that can change the world.

Amen.

Let us pray:

God of grace and love and power and peace, we bow our heads in prayer – and in humility, allow ourselves to be moved by Christ’s love and the power of Your Holy Spirit.

As ever, we are reminded in all things, that Your love for us is all-encompassing. In joy and sorrow, gain and loss, peace and strife, You are with us, inviting us, cajoling us to be those people on whose hearts is imprinted Your ways of love.

Save us from “itching ears” that invite us to wander from Your truths. Encourage us to be a people of faith – and to be the family You call us to be, lifting one another up in times of need and holding us all the closer in times we need forgiveness – from You our God and from one another.

We would just as soon not be as fragile as we sometimes feel or even show. But in that, may we ever know that You are our strength and stay, the source of incredible compassion and that You invite us to remember in prayer people who know strife and hurt and loss.

We pray for the peoples of Rochester who seem to know the daily pain of shootings and violence, for peoples of the world who know car-bombings as an everyday event, for those who know the pain of inter-racial, inter-tribal and inter-religious hatred. We pray for military and civilian personnel who are part of peace-making missions. May they keep the faith, be patient even in the face of those who would do them harm, and remember at all times the virtues that we of this country hold so dear – fairness, justice, compassion, equality, and deliverance.

Deliver us from all evil –

We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Amen.