**Sermon 7/31/16 Justice for the faithful: Parable of the Persistent Widow**

Good morning my name is Emma Loane, I’m the Pastor of Student Ministries here and I’ll be continuing in our ‘Uncovered’ series where we’ve been looking at the unique stories that Jesus told in the Gospel of Luke. Our aim has been to uncover and perhaps rediscover some truths that are as relevant today as they were when Jesus was telling them. However, before I jump straight into our parable for today, I want to show you a video of some of the things that Youth Ministry has been up to since school was let out about 2 months ago:

*[Show “Summer 2016” video, 3:30]*

The reason I show a video of the stuff our youth have been doing this summer is because in every exhausting night spent away from home, they give me hope. I see and hear the things they care about and hope for in this life. I get to experience and share in their passion to be persons of faith actively engaged a world, that while we were gone seemed to be tearing itself apart at the seams. Our teenagers are growing up in a culture of near-sighted self-interest, of instant gratification, instant fixes, instant communication and instant answers. We want to be told what to think about particular issues and problems in just a few sound bytes, rather than to think for ourselves.

We as adults are in this world too and we are no more immune to its effects than our children. So when we approach scripture hoping to glean that quick nugget of truth, rather than wanting to immerse our whole lives in the instruction, wisdom, prophecy and the stories of Jesus we forfeit the nourishment needed for the lifelong journey of discipleship. Parents you are the primary influencers of the spiritual development of your kids. You do not want to shortchange your own spiritual growth. As they look out into a world so full of injustice, division and fear they are struggling to see what their role, as a young Christian, should be.

This summer, on June 12, Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old security guard, killed 49 people and wounded 53 others inside Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, FL. On June 28, 42 people died after terrorists launched an attack at the international airport in Istanbul. On July 5, police in Baton Rouge, shot and killed Alton Sterling, an unarmed black man, at point-blank range. On July 6, a police officer in a suburb of the Twin Cities shot and killed Philado Castile, an unarmed black man, during a traffic stop. The next night, on July 7, five Dallas police officers were shot dead by Micah Xavier Johnson, an Army Reserve Afghan War veteran angry over police shootings of unarmed black men. Police killed Johnson with a remote bomb. On July 14, as crowds were observing Bastille Day on the French Riviera, a man drove a truck into a crowd in Nice, leaving 84 people dead. On July 15, a faction of the Turkish military attempted to stage a coup. On July 17, three police officers were fatally shot in Baton Rouge, by a gunman who was later killed by police. On July 22, 9 people died in a shooting rampage in a busy shopping area in Munich, Germany. Late on Thursday night, 2 officers in San Diego are shot, resulting the in the death of one, leaving the other expected to survive after surgery on Friday morning - and I’m sure I’m missing other events besides. Church, what are we to do?

The truth is, we live in a world that is broken, with systems, powers, and principalities that have a blatant disregard for justice and human life, and the world of the widow in today’s parable is no different. So before we open up this passage, let me start with a prayer.

*[Pray and Read Luke 18:1-8]*

In the very first verse of our passage, we find out the point of this parable. Jesus told this story to his 12 recruits so that they would “pray continuously and not be discouraged.” There are two actors in this parable: The judge and the widow. In Galilean villages at this time, judges were usually older men that people trusted to settle their disputes. In this case, this judge by his own admission had no regard for God or for people. Maybe he thought that made him less partial, or maybe he just knew how complicated justice really is, and he doesn’t let people get to him. Then we have the widow who has nothing: no husband, no family, no station in society, no money, no power, nothing. But this widow, she gets to the judge. She gets under his skin. Ordinarily a widow, or any woman for that matter, would need a male intermediary to come into such a court. But seems this widow has no one and she just keeps coming directly to this judge for justice. For us, it is she that emulates what it means to have faith in God in the face of human opposition and corruption, the likes of which we are not strangers to in 2016.

She interrupts his courtroom, “Give me justice!” She comes persistently to his office, “Give me justice!” She slides notes under his door. She holds signs in his front yard. “Give me Justice!” She leaves messages on his voicemail and persists in every way possible to wear him down, until he finally says to himself, “Fine! I don’t care about this widow. I don’t like God or people, but she is embarrassing me, and I can get no peace! I’ll grant her ‘justice’ just to get her off my back!” She didn’t give up, and in the end of the story Jesus points to the unjust judge and says, if even a powerless widow can find justice from an unjust judge, how much more will God who has known us from before we were born, down to the number of hairs on our head, who has given up everything to redeem us, whose love exceeds time and eternity, how much more will we find a God who will listen and grant justice.

This parable is clearly about the power of persistence and many biblical scholars and believers alike would be satisfied with this understanding, and move on. But the person of Jesus pushes us to look beyond simple answers, and to listen for the still small voice of God’s wisdom beneath the surface of this apparent meaning. This parable is absolutely about the power of persistent prayer, but also about the quest for justice. It is about the work of God’s justice done when the faithful pray, with their words as well as with their actions.

As simple as it sounds, remaining faithful is no easy task, and the widow shows us the struggle of those who seek justice in an unjust world. In these short 8 verses, we can recognize and relate to the corruption that the widow encounters. We can yearn, like her, for good to come out of bad. We can also appreciate that though our world is very different from hers, it is still easy to lose heart. It is still easy to become discouraged, fatigued with violence and lose sight of the One whose infinite power is able to bring about justice and transformation in this world. So yes, remain faithful in praying continuously and not be discouraged, but also be persistent in your quest for justice - for justice is central to Kingdom of God. That promised power and presence of God in Jesus, in our lives and in our community. In Jesus’ finishing remarks in verse 7, he says: “Won’t God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help? I tell you, he will give them justice quickly.”

So, what is this justice? Theologically, we have often seen it as the opposite to “God’s mercy.” “God’s justice” is understood as God’s deserved punishment of us for our sin, “God’s mercy” on the other hand, is God’s loving forgiveness of us in spite of our guilt. Given this choice, we would all prefer God’s mercy and hope to escape God’s justice. But this understanding distorts what the Bible means by justice. Most often in the Bible, the opposite of God’s justice is not God’s mercy, but human injustice.

Human injustice, manifested in political, economic, and social systems that create inequality and unnecessary human misery are born out of sin. Which is in perfect opposition to God. The test - of the justice of systems - is their impact on human lives. To what extent do they lead to human flourishing and to what extent to human suffering?

We read throughout scripture the protests of the prophets as they oppose the systemic injustice of the kingdoms and empires that dominated their world. They do so in the name of God and on behalf of the victims—slaves in Egypt, exiles in Babylon, exploited peasants in the time of the monarchy and again in the time of Jesus, and the most vulnerable in all times—widows, orphans, the poor, and the marginalized. And in the name of God, they advocate a very different vision of our life together. These are the original activists.

In Jeremiah 22, God speaks about the responsibility that His people have to “deliver the plundered out of the hand of the oppressor. Do no wrong and do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place” (v3). If they refuse to take this responsibility seriously, the Lord guarantees that they will “become a desolation” (v5). After drawing attention to the faithful who “do justice and righteousness” and stand for the “poor and needy,” God asks this profound question: “Isn’t that what it means to know me?” (v16). The vision God casts is one where his children seek “to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with him” (6:8).

Jesus embodied this vision and when he spoke of the Kingdom of God his hearers would have heard an immediate contrast with their current situation. The Kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. The Kingdom of God is about God’s justice in contrast to the systemic injustice of the kingdoms and domination systems of this world. It is a reminder that we need to pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven” with a new fervor.

When Jesus enters his public ministry, we see him time and time again focusing on plight of the poor, the sick and the oppressed. If you have been reading the Gospel of Luke along with us throughout this summer you may have noticed that in chapter 4 as Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath and the assistant unrolls the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” So, when Jesus tells this ‘Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge’ and her cry is, “Give me justice”, Jesus is revealing something of the heart of God and something of his own purpose. The cry for justice is at the core of the Gospel, and at the core of what it means to be a Christian.

Our youth and many of you participated in our local mission project in June called Mission Here. Through this 4-day event we want the church to move outside these walls and show the love of Christ to those in our community. We do this through building steps, making paths, putting up handrails, planting flowerbeds, emptying guttering, cleaning and painting homes and numerous other minor home repairs. This is a noble aim and I believe that it has been successful in showing people that they are not forgotten, that God loves them and that the church cares for them. Yet Mission Here has only scratched the surface of what I believe God is asking of us as faithful disciples. As we partnered with SWIRCA and Tri-Cap we only starting to uncover some of the injustices in our area, those things that are in opposition to God’s justice. Just two things that my eyes were opened to were: (1) The reality of poverty on our own doorstep- in particularly the rise of the working poor in Southern Indiana, and (2) the lack of dignity for the sick and elderly in our community.

It is shocking to me that despite full-time work, the income of many adults in Warrick and Vanderburgh County still falls below the poverty line. Now, granted poverty here looks very different than poverty in other places and countries. But, Melissa Fry, a research director at Indiana University, says the increasing numbers of those referred to, as the ‘working poor’ is evidence of a 60% rise in poverty in Southern Indiana in the decade from 2000 to 2010. We know this is true from the families who visit out food pantry and clothes closet, as well as our Summer Food Program. She goes on to explain that people who live with this level of poverty "have less access to economic opportunity, to quality education, to good childcare and are more likely to see some of the social problems that we associate with poor communities such as crime, substance abuse or unattended children". Through Tri-Cap we know of working families in our County who struggled to afford childcare while working multiple jobs and pre-school education for their children, even provide safe living environments in which to bring up their children. Mission Here may have succeeded in part to show God’s love beyond walls of the church, but I ask myself, did it bring about justice for those we served? The answer is no. We, as followers of Christ, need to be concerned about the systems that perpetuate poverty in our own community, creating situations where the wages from multiple jobs cannot give a family financial security: pray continuously and do not be discouraged in your quest for justice.

SWIRCA, which we also partnered with for Mission Here, exists to develop an array of services that benefit the elderly and disabled in our county and neighboring counties. They want to prevent the inappropriate institutionalization of the elderly and instead promote self-sufficiency among senior adults and those who are disabled. The need they aim to meet is overwhelming. Many elderly and sick, particularly those with no family nearby, experience deep loneliness and fear in their own homes, coupled with inadequate nutrition and access to appropriate healthcare. The biblical vision for society is rooted in a longing for a perfect community of love. We live with a deep yearning for that quality of relationship one another and God. So, as Christians, when we discover and get to know people who are lonely, scared and hungry, our hearts should break. This is not God’s vision. These injustices are contrary to the Kingdom of God. Pray continuously and do not give up in your quest for justice.

We are doing great missional work in many ways as a congregation, both here and abroad, but I think God’s hope for his church is greater that we can even imagine. We are showing love, but the more difficult question is: Are we persistent in our quest for God’s justice? Justice is complicated. Miraculous even. At the end of the Parable at the end of verse 8, we read “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?” Before we enter into a time of intercession, (as I invite Tim up) I’ll finish with this. **A person’s faithfulness is not measured only by their frequent (even persistent) prayers, but also by the degree to which they share God’s passion for justice and live it out in a broken world.** How we relate to those around us is the barometer that reveals whether or not we’ve genuinely encountered and experienced God. May we pray always and not lose heart for the work of justice.

Will you bow you head and pray with me, you’ll find those requesting prayer listed in the bulletin and if you feel led to use the kneeler up front, please don’t hesitate to come forward as well. Let’s pray.

21:00

[Morning Prayers]