

In Mark Twain's novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," Huck is constantly getting into some kind of trouble. After one particular mess, his guardian Miss Watson takes him in the closet of his room to pray, hoping that God can straighten him out since she clearly wasn't having any luck.

Huck says, "Miss Watson, told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it.

"Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks.

"It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work."

So Huck gave up on prayer saying, "There ain't nothin in it."

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We might not be as honest about it as Huckleberry Finn, but we've probably all had the experience of praying and not getting the answer that we wanted. As much as we want to pay attention to what Jesus said, that we should "Pray always," it can be hard to keep at it with a sense of enthusiasm when it feels like your prayers aren't getting the response you're hoping for. Especially when you're praying about something a lot more important than fishhooks.

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Our gospel for today is one of those conversations Jesus had while he was on the road with the disciples. He'd been teaching them about discipleship and what it means to be faithful. They met up with a group of lepers and they begged Jesus to heal them. And so he healed all ten but only one came back to say thanks. And then, the very next thing that happened, some Pharisees asked Jesus when God's kingdom would come.

He told them that *God's kingdom isn't something you can see. There's no use saying, 'Look! Here it is' or 'Look! There it is.'* *God's kingdom is here, with you.* And then he said to the disciples, *The time will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man- when you will want to see the fulfillment of God's kingdom. People will tell you to look for the Messiah in one place or another, but don't go looking.*

That day will be like lightning flashing across the sky. And he says it will be just like when Noah built the ark. Or when Sodom was destroyed. It will be a huge surprise and you won't know it's coming until it's there.

Jesus said, at that time no one on a rooftop should go down into the house to get anything. No one in a field should go back to the house for anything. Remember what happened to Lot's wife.

People who try to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives will save them.

On that night two people will be sleeping in the same bed, but only one will be taken. The other will be left. Two women will be together grinding wheat, but only one will be taken. The other will be left.

Then Jesus' disciples spoke up, *But where will this happen, Lord?*

Jesus said, *Where there is a corpse, there will always be buzzards.¹*

I've seen some of those since I moved out here and when you see them, you know something's happening.

And then, (Jesus makes this comment about the buzzards) – and then, he tells them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

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I know I probably say this way too often – but it can be so helpful to understand the context of Bible stories and quotes. If you don't know the lead up to this particular story, what Jesus was saying about prayer can be really disheartening.

¹ Adapted from the *Contemporary English Version*, Luke 17:20-37

The pharisees and the disciples both wanted to know about the end times; when God would judge his people and what would happen. They were curious about when and where and how. And Jesus didn't want his friends to give up because the time was going to come when he would leave them. They would want him to return and it wouldn't happen on the timetable they were expecting. He wanted them to understand that even when things seem terribly uncertain, God is listening and will always be just.

Even if it seems like a really long time until he returns, Jesus will keep his promises. So he wanted us all to know that we shouldn't give up. Trust God at his word and to make his point, he tells them the parable of the widow and the unjust judge.

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At first glance it may seem like we don't know much about the woman in the story, but the word "widow" tells us everything that we need to know about her. Widows in that time and place were as helpless as helpless can be. They weren't allowed to inherit their husband's estate. They couldn't work for a living. Their lives were completely dependent on someone else agreeing to take care of them.

Jewish law said that when there was nobody else to care for a widow, the community was responsible and there is a warning that says that anyone who fails to take care of a widow will be cursed.

The trouble was, this judge didn't care about God. And he didn't care about the law. And he didn't care about this widow. He didn't feel guilty about any of it. He had no sense of compassion. There was nothing motivating him to listen to the woman. She had no power so he could ignore her for as long as he wanted. He didn't give a hoot about anybody but himself, but her persistence and her demands for justice were so intense, so bothersome and annoying, that he describes her actions as those of a boxer.

It doesn't come through in the English but in the original Greek which says, "because this widow causes trouble for me, I will give her justice, so that she may not, in the end, give me a black eye by her coming."

By using the verb *hypopiazo*, which means "to give a black eye," Luke characterizes the widow as one tough cookie who is a definite troublemaker. She's nobody's sweet little grandma. She's a feisty woman who isn't about to throw in the towel! Scholar Brittany Wilson says that "We are probably meant to laugh at this topsy-turvy picture of a lowly widow pummeling a recalcitrant arbiter of justice. But as New Testament scholar F. Scott Spencer rightly recognizes, the humor in this scene is not one of comic relief... [Jesus' parable is meant to encourage] us to laugh at those who wield their power unethically. We laugh, though, in order to challenge such figures, and ultimately, to offer a different way." We laugh because we know their power isn't really that powerful.

Jesus said, "Listen to what this wicked man is saying. If he's willing to back down and listen to this woman; to grant her the justice that she asked for, how much more readily will God have compassion for those who are praying to him both night and day. He will hear their case." He will grant them justice. And that is an important distinction. He will grant them justice.

Jesus' parable is about prayer, but it is also about a certain kind of prayer. A prayer for fairness and equity. A prayer for justice. Without all of the context that goes around all of that – this parable can be utterly frustrating.

We earnestly and sincerely pray. We ask God to help someone we love or to have mercy on someone who is suffering. We pray for peace between nations and peace between people. We ask for guidance and assurance. We hope and we wait – but then the request that we make seems to go unanswered. Or we feel like the answer really wasn't what we'd hoped for.

We call on God in prayer every Sunday, praying for members of our community. Some get better and some don't. And so it can be almost impossible not to start questioning the results of our prayers. Were we not fervent enough? Did we need

to pray more often? Or have more people praying? It can be heart breaking to feel so strongly that God must be in agreement with us. God must want this suffering to end. God must want this thing to change for this person that we care about. I can't be the only one who cares about them! It's not fair. Why didn't God do what we asked? It's just not fair! Especially when something horrid is happening to someone we love so very much. It's not fair.

But as my mother has told me hundreds of times- life is not fair.

Which really is the good news for today. That's the gospel for today. Life is not fair.

If life was fair, God would judge us for who we are, and we would come up short. We are sinful. We do what we want. And we leave off doing things we know God wants us to do.

If life was fair, God would judge us for who we are, and we would come up short every single time. We are sinful. We do what we want. We leave off doing things that we know God has called us to do. We aren't always the people that God wants us to be. So, if life was fair, we would never know the grace of God. We wouldn't experience the love and forgiveness God offers, because we haven't earned it. We don't deserve it.

We would be facing eternal damnation. All the powers of death would be against us as we looked toward separation from God and we would be doomed, if life was fair.

Our text today says that the woman was seeking justice against her enemy and she persists in bothering the judge day after day until he finally relents and agrees to hear her case. He grants her the justice that she deserves. And Jesus says, if someone, so cruel can do the right thing, won't God? Don't be afraid that God isn't looking and listening and watching out for you.

"But when the Son of Man returns, will he find anyone who believes? Who has faith in God's promises?"

Wilson says that by ending the parable with this question, Jesus raises more questions for us. How should followers not lose heart and maintain their faith in light of the fact that it's been two thousand years and Jesus still hasn't come back?

How are we to act if God's justice is not delivered according to our timetable?

How do we go on in the face of injustice if God's ultimate justice only arrives "suddenly" at Jesus' return?

In response to such questions, Luke maintains that we are to act like the widow. We are not to wait quietly for Jesus' return and accept our fates in an oppression-ridden world. We are instead to resist injustice with the resolve and the constancy of that widow. As Jesus explains elsewhere, prayer is not a passive activity but one that actively seeks God and pursues God's will.

Like the widow, we are to persevere in the faith, crying out to God day and night because that's what persistent prayer looks like.

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A man was once asked, "What did you gain by regularly praying to God?" The man replied, "Nothing... but let me tell you what I lost: anger, greed, insecurity and fear."

We pray to God to deal with the things that concern us in the big world and in the small world that is our daily lives. And Jesus says, keep at it. Keep praying.

And life isn't fair. Sometimes the things that we pray for, the things that we hope for don't happen. The world is set up in a way that means those things won't happen. Our prayers aren't unanswered, but they aren't answered the way we'd hoped. At the end though, the justice that we will experience will far exceed our expectations. What God has prepared for us at the end of this complicated life is far better than anything we could imagine.

For me there are times when my prayers feel so difficult because I pray for something- I pray for someone – I pray for you all- and I wish things would go this way and they go that way. But we aren't to give up. We are to remember that God is with us.

I have a friend, a pastor friend that I worked with that said that church is about leaning into the middle. When life is hard and you feel like you're going to fall, if you lean into the middle, you can hold each other up. And I think that it's true, but I also think that we need to remember that in the middle of that is the cross of Christ.

We lean to the middle and we pray for those we love. We pray for justice in the world and as we are leaning in, God is there for us.

Our prayer becomes a companionship. God is there to listen, and God is there to help us deal with the things that happen. Sometimes we may not get healing for someone we love but we get bravery to deal with the difficulties. We get strength to deal with those things that make us weary. We lean into the middle. And so we do not lose heart but keep praying.

God is listening to your prayers.

And life is not fair.

And so, one day, we will celebrate this good news in the kingdom of God.