

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8
MJ Pattison,
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Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In an Op Ed piece that appeared in the Times Union last Thursday morning, journalist Sue Carlton wrote

“Some mornings you wake up and you do not want to go to work... You think, if only I could win the lottery, if only my car didn’t need a new muffler...if only my electric bill wasn’t spiking as the Dow drops... You open the paper and see stories of toxic sludge and earthquakes ... You read a story about a hospice worker charged with stealing a 92 year old widow’s wedding ring and you think “What kind of world are we running here?” and then you see the story of the miners in Chile...”¹

Last Wednesday evening, along with the rest of the world I sat riveted in front of my computer watching the MSNBC live as the last of the 33 Chilean Miners were resurrected from their

¹ Times Union Commentary “Out of the mine, back in the boring world” 10/14/10

underground tomb. This unfolding story which has been a lingering anxiety in the back of the world's mind for 69 days suddenly thrust itself to the forefront while , for twenty two and a half hours around the globe we counted in unison, uno- dos- tres- until at last foreman Luis Urzua, was pulled to the surface and stepped out of the cage with a broad grin on his face.– It was a rare and very welcome good news break from relentless attack ads and stories of graft, greed, and just plain stupidity. Simply watching made you proud to be a human being, proud to be a citizen of the world and anxious to be a better one.

For me, though there was an added advantage. On Wednesday night I had set aside time to begin working on this sermon- I had already read the commentaries and had developed a pretty uninspired outline. I was really struggling with this morning's lesson from the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The topic is prayer . Luke is clear about that. Jesus' purpose in telling this parable is to emphasize that his followers “need to pray always

and to not lose heart”. It’s a good thing that he told us this because ,I have to say, this is a really peculiar parable.

Most of the time the way to begin to interpret a parable of Jesus is to decide who God is in the story and who we are in the story. But if we did that in this case then we have this extremely unattractive caricature of God as a morally rudderless Judge who doesn’t care what anyone thinks of him and is utterly disdainful of those who seek his help, but will eventually answer our prayers because he is sick and tired of our constant complaining. Likewise, the petitioning widow is not much more attractive, - the image of a child in the candy aisle after a long morning of shopping comes to mind. Can Jesus really be telling his followers to keep whining and pestering God and someday God out of sheer annoyance will answer our petitions?

Of course not.

But then what are we to make of this story?

First, it is helpful to think about who Jesus is addressing. In the story itself Jesus is addressing a crowd of followers, but the gospel

writer, Luke, *through Jesus* is speaking to the early church just as the epistle lesson, Paul's first letter to Timothy, speaks to a similar community. These are small bands of isolated Christian believers who prayed fervently for Jesus second coming and thought the millennium was imminent. they are growing weary and discouraged. The Pagan Greek world around them is at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile. Believers are falling away. It is easy to get discouraged, to get distracted, to wander off, to another rally around more attractive, more popular and less demanding God. There are plenty to choose from. . This is such a concern that Paul presses Timothy "I solemnly urge you, to proclaim the message ; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke and encourage with utmost patience in teaching" and likewise, Luke through Jesus wonders aloud "When the son of man comes will he find faith on earth?.

I thought about these struggling early Christian communities as I watched the rescue cage make its slow methodical decent down

the half mile vertical shaft to a truly desperate community of men, and another interpretation of the parable of widow and the unjust judge came to me.

What if the unjust judge represents not God but our heartless, capricious world which seems so out of control and which does not reward the good or punish the unrighteous ; where things go wrong in acts of nature or because of human greed , incompetence, selfishness, cruelty or negligence. And what if the widow's persistent petition is not self absorbed obsession but instead the courageous and stubborn refusal to accept that this worlds standards and expectations are all that is possible?

For 17 days those 33 men were buried alive and they knew that no one on the surface knew that they were still alive – and against all the evidence their foreman, Luis Urzua led them in creating a community founded on patience and hope in spite of the black evidence that surrounded them. They kept each other alive day after day on food that was expected to last three days. How hard that must have been on day seven, hungry in that hot and silent

and pitch black hole. What possibility did the world around them offer? We should not idealize this, and I'm sure in the coming days the stories of what happened down there will reveal just how difficult it was for them to wait and pray and hope. But they did. Then came the moment when the drill broke through and a note went up that said "All 33 of us are fine in the shelter" not just alive FINE.- and oh by the way could someone send down some toothbrushes? A heart felt prayer – for toothbrushes!

And still before them were two more interminable months of waiting with patience and hope for the world to succeed at something that no one had ever done.. Then finally this week with the start of the rescue just hours away- they began fighting- not in a mad scramble to be first out of the nightmare- they fought over who would be last one up the shaft.

"Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and to not lose heart"

Prayer is not something that only occurs in a quiet place with heads bowed and carefully crafted petitions whispered. Prayers are

prayed in anger, and desperation when out of the depths we cry,
but also in those moments when we suddenly see our lives as
precious, an extraordinary and holy gift. When we pray prayers of
thanksgiving for walks, and for meals and for the bus ride and the
sound that the leaves make in the fall and for toothbrushes!

Prayer is a way of life, a way of being in the world that brings God
into every circumstance. Genuine prayer is an ongoing
conversation and sometimes even an argument with the Almighty,
persistent and continuous and honest that at its heart both
believes that justice prevails in the little things and Demands that
justice will prevail over meaninglessness and despair.

And because praying is an ongoing conversation we are free
to pray with wild abandon.. I don't know about you, but, good
Presbyterian that I am, I am sometimes tempted to make my
prayers reasonable- to ask God for only what I believe is possible
or what the evidence suggests will be a predictable outcome. It is
tempting to tailor our prayers into something we know that God
can grant-

Resist that temptation. The widow kept coming and insisting saying grant me justice against my opponent” . She was not careful she was not diplomatic but she was persistent. . I believe that God wants us to pray persistently for exactly what we want no matter how big or how small, in spite of all the evidence. We need to sharing our prayers if only to hear what they sound like-- to set them free to grow and change and blossom.

If your fervent prayers are for healing, pray for healing- For a relationship pray for it, for a job or a direction in life or a second chance, release from an addiction or obsession, or even a much desired thing that will make us or someone we care about happy. Go ahead and pray. Invite god into the discussion – “ask and it shall be given, seek and you shall find”,(Matthew 7:7) “Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? “ I believe God wants us honest about what we think we need. Not because God doesn’t know- Jesus in the sermon on the mount confirms that “God knows what we need even before we ask it”

(Matthew 6:8)) But we don't always know our own prayers until we articulate them, offer them and let go of the outcome.

Let go of the outcome.

This final prayerful step is the most important. God is not our fairy godmother who grants our every wish- We were never promised a problem free existence in exchange for our faith- and we are not promised that we will never die- only that death is not the end. The good life does not mean that we are uniquely favored by God and hard times are NOT sign of divine displeasure or evidence that God has abandoned us. In a free creation things go wrong- Storms overwhelm, greedy deals implode, stocks crash, jobs disappear and people can be very cruel to each other. The world is filled with unjust judges who neither fear God nor respect the people but they are not God- God is greater than all of them .

God's time is not our time

God's answer to our prayers may not be the one that we want or expect but our faith and our experience and the stories we tell each other every Sunday in this place attest to God's reliability . Our

Lord loves us with an unconditional love and will give us what we need and sometimes we may only see it truly when we look back from the other side of our sorrow and our longings.

While Ariel Tacona was trapped underground his wife gave birth to a baby daughter. She named her Esperanza which means Hope

Mario Sepulveda, was the second man to be lifted out of the ground.

He raised his fists in a cheer of triumph then jubilantly handed souvenir rocks from his underground prison to laughing rescuers.

"I met God down there, and I met the Devil" Sepulveda said

"They fought,

God won,"

Amen.