

**“Pestering”**  
**“Written on the Heart**  
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**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

**Jeremiah 31: 27-34**

<sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and **I will write it on their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, **“Know the Lord,** “ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says Yahweh; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

**Luke 18: 1-8**

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and **not to lose heart**. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, **I will grant her justice**, so that, she may not wear me out by continually coming.” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 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?”

## SERMON

We turned off the lights. She said it was too dark. I got up to hopefully find a light we could leave on that would not shine in our eyes. There was none to be found. I said, “Just touch grandma, so you know you are not alone.” So she rolled over and placed herself in the small of my back.

“Is that better?” I asked. “Yes,” she said.

As I lay there in silence trying to find sleep, I lifted up to God my thanks for the day. There did not seem to be anything wrong with the world with her laying in the curve of my back, only thanks. Out of the silence, in a whisper came, “Grandma, do you pray?”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s what I’m doing right now.”

“Really!” she said. “Would you mind doing it out loud?”

“No, not at all.” I continued my prayer out loud letting her hear the thankfulness in my heart.

When I finished she said, “Grandma, when you see me make a wish upon a star...” and I had seen her do this almost every evening while I was visiting in Secaucus, NJ, “...well, when you see me make a wish upon a star, I’m wishing that things will get better in my family—you know with my half sister and brother. Oh, how I wish it will.”

In her eight year old mind, she had connected my praying with her wishing. And so I said out loud, “Dear God, I know You hear the wish written upon Ashley’s heart, and that You are doing everything You can to remove the things that are keeping her brother and sister from her. We know that what is written upon her heart matters to You. Amen.” That may well be one of the most important prayers I ever prayed.

Oh how I hate the day when she will outgrow that wishful stage. She will, you know. We all do. The day will come when she will no longer wish upon a star. She will, as certainly as I stand here this day, leave the realm where fairy tales come true. I just hope and pray she never turns away from noticing what's written on her heart--or as Jesus says it, she won't "lose heart!" My wish, my prayer is that her wishes will turn to prayers that **lead her to know God.**

Jeremiah has been teaching doom and gloom for some time now. You'd think he would have gotten tired of listening to his own negativity long before chapter 31. Finally he changes his tune. "The days are surely coming..." The destruction, the "plucking up" will be ended. This will be a season of planting and restoration.

In that day there shall be a "new covenant. "One not written on stone, but upon people's hearts. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know Yahweh!' For they shall know me." (Jeremiah 31: 34) Jeremiah points to a knowledge deeper than mere facts about God. Knowing someone deeply and well comes from an intimate knowing, a being on first name basis knowing, a knowing that comes from conversations that last way into the wee hours of the morning. That's the kind of knowing I wish for my granddaughter, myself and every one of you.

Jesus' teachings today turn us to the danger we all face in **losing that intimate knowing of God.** At first, reading this parable about the pestering widow and unjust judge makes me want to laugh. At first glance it would seem we are supposed to make pests of ourselves in hopes God will respond to us, if only to shut us up. Pastor Stephan uses the word pestering when he is not sure he won't step over our American boundaries if he calls, e-mails, or texts more than once.

Apparently in Germany, if you make an attempt to contact someone and they do not respond, you have to assume they do not want to be in touch with you. We United States Americans will usually assume that you need to follow up if someone does not respond. Well there are times when I wonder whether I should try or not. We United States citizens are always walking a thin line in discerning

whether to call again or not. It would be nice to have a hard fast rule, try once, that's it—or you will be seen as a pest.

The woman of today's story has no problem with making a pest of herself. Luke does not tell us what her complaint is about. We only know she comes seeking justice. Based on the fact that she is a widow we can deduct that her concern is about her dead husband's estate. "Under Jewish law she cannot inherit it—it goes straight to her sons or her brothers-in-law—but she is allowed to live off of it, unless someone is trying to cheat her out of it. The fact that she comes alone to the judge indicates that there are no men on her side. If there were men in her life looking out for her wellbeing, they would have kept her at home and settled matters in a more civilized manner. "No son wants his mother hanging the family laundry in the street. No brother-in-law wants his brother's widow disgracing the family name."<sup>1</sup>

She must have had no one watching her back. But as the judge is soon to find out, here's a woman more than capable of taking care of herself. Now remember Jesus has made a point of letting us know this judge is not a respectable guy. He has no fear of God or respect for anyone. People and even God do not get to him, but this widow does.

We cannot fully hear the humor in our English translation of the parable. In Greek we realize that Luke uses a boxing term to describe the woman's brand of pestering. "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone," the unjust judge says, "yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out with *continued blows under the eye*." This is clearly a little more than typical pestering. She's going at him like a mad prize fighter. And the judge does not want to be seen around town with a black eye given by an old, widow woman. He's got his tough guy persona to protect. This is sort of like a Punch and Judy parable that sets us to laughing at ourselves in recognition—until we realize it is not a laughing matter.

George Carlin had this routine about the fact that one needed to build a house so we would have a place to keep our stuff. The first time I heard it, I laughed myself silly because it held up a mirror for us to see the humor in my behavior. Once the joke brings us to this point, then we begin to probe its

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By another Way*, p.201-202

depth. “Yes, he’s right. We have all this unnecessary stuff in our lives—for which we crave more...storage.

If we’d been with the disciple the day Jesus told this humorous parable we would have known it comes on the heels of Jesus’ rather scary declaration about the end of time. “I tell you,” he says, “on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left.” Then they asked him “Where, Lord?” He said to them, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.” (Luke 17: 34-37)

He had no more than finished this declaration than he began the story of the unjust judge. Luke ties this declaration to this parable because by the time Luke writes his gospel the people are starting to get tired of waiting and ever praying for this bed snatching to start. They have prayed so long and so hard for God’s justice that it is wearing their hearts right out of them. That is why Jesus tells us about our “need to pray always and not to lose heart.” The parable is not about pestering God, it’s about not giving up on God even when our wants seem impossible to obtain.

In a phone conference with Martha Grace Reese, the author of *Unbinding the Gospel*, she told us a true story about a church she had worked with that told her what they wanted was children. “Now”, she said, “this church’s make up was of 70 year olds and older--well past the age of child bearing. Plus, this was an inner city church that had painted its church black to cover all the graffiti. The church looked like some sort of Darth Vader church. But in spite of all the reasons they were not going to attract children”, Martha said, “if what you want is children then pray for them.” And so they did, down in the dark cold basement of their church.

As they were praying one day a ball bounced against one of those high basement windows. And when they looked up, but what to their wondering eye did they behold but— children. They all got up and ran outside to find a mother with her two children. She apologized that the kids' ball had hit their church window and assured them it would not happen again. "Oh," they said, "don't worry about that. You're the answer to our prayers!" And that got mom and those parishioners to talking. Next thing you know, they had 50 kids in Vacation Bible School that summer. Come fall, 15 children were attending Sunday School.

As I drifted off to sleep that night I wonder what I would tell Ashley if some day she asked of me, "Why pray? Why bother when there is no sign that God has even heard, much less answered my prayer?"

Do I dare tell her this parable? What if she gets the idea, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "that the way to get what she wants is to keep punching God under the eye?" Worse yet, what if she gathers that God will answer her not in order to draw her closer but in order to get rid of her.

I think I will take Barbara's advice and tell her the story with the focus on the woman. Once there was a woman all alone without anyone to help her, but she did not lose heart. She never lost sight of what was written upon her heart. She knew what she wanted, and she knew who could give it to her. Whether he gave it or not was beyond her control, but that did not matter to her. She was willing to say what she wanted—out loud, day and night, over and over—whether she got it or not, because saying it was how she remembered who she was. It was how she remembered the shape of her heart. While there may have been people who were embarrassed by her exposing herself like that, she just wanted to say, "Don't knock it until you try it! Don't give up on your dreams...on what's written on your heart!"