

“STEWARDSHIP CONNECTIONS: JUSTICE”

Hebrews 12:1-2; Luke 18:1-8

November 6, 2022

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We struggled a little with the title for this week’s message. The parable invites us to think about perseverance, patience, and justice. We weren’t sure which word related better to the idea of a stewardship connection. Justice seemed to be more the same kind of word as we addressed the other weeks: treasures, the earth, and neighbors. Justice seemed more like a thing, whereas perseverance and patience seemed more like a quality. On the other hand justice is a big idea that could easily steal the focus from stewardship. In the end I’ve decided to talk about all three, because each offers its own perspective on stewardship.

Jesus told this parable in order to encourage the disciples to persevere in prayer and to not lose heart. This is the gospel writer’s understanding of Jesus’ intent. Written about fifty years after Jesus’ ministry, it suits the writer’s time quite well. The Christian community was marginalized, if not outright persecuted by the Roman authorities. The persistence of the widow models the behavior the evangelist wants to encourage in the community. Keep praying, he says, because even if the courts are reluctant to grant you mercy, God, who is just, will see to your need. Be patient. Your redemption is coming.

One often hears about the stewardship of time, talent, and treasure. Well, perseverance is the stewardship of time. We stay the course, exercise patience, and pray at all times, expecting that God will hear our pleas. Hebrews 11 gives us a long list of people of faith who believed the promise, but had not yet received it. They are the great cloud of witnesses referred to in chapter 12. And that cloud of witnesses is added to each year down to the present day. We call this the communion of saints, people who modeled faithfulness to us. Today we remember saints who have encouraged us when we might have lost heart. Maintaining our connection to those who have gone before us is also part of the stewardship of time. Marking the past in this way gives us the hope that Martin Luther King Jr. was right when he said, “the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

In seeing ourselves in the widow, we are reminded of our responsibility to plead for justice, to see the face of Christ in the hungry, the poor and the imprisoned. Advocacy, connecting with those who experience injustice, is a stewardship responsibility. When we are able to identify with the widow, this is easy to understand.

Those belonging to Luke’s community would have found this to be true. For them the meaning of the parable is straightforward. Keep praying, be patient, persist in your demands for justice. God will hear you.

But there is another way to look at this parable. Rev. Dawn Hutchings suggests we consider it from the perspective of the unjust judge. She sees the widow as God pleading for justice before us, the unjust judge.

Well I was feeling a bit of sympathy for the unjust judge this past week. Every time we receive a request for rental assistance, I have to take a deep breath. Unlike the widow, I begin to lose heart. Like the judge, I am reluctant to respond. For one thing, I know the need far exceeds the resources. For another, I know that this problem is not primarily about a failure in individual responsibility. Low wages, high rents, a shortage of housing in general and a well-meaning, but inadequate response from society have created an overwhelming crisis. We received three requests last week, each one an invitation to lose heart.

Hutchings argues that the parable originally emphasized human responsibility for rendering justice, that justice would not come until the unjust judge brought it; that the refusal to hear the cries of the widow was a refusal to hear God. It's a little like when the disciples complain about not having enough food to feed the multitude. Jesus, rather unfeeling in one version of the story, says "You feed them." It may be that when we follow instructions (sit the people down and begin distributing food), some miracle will happen.

It may be that when we begin to act justly, that "justice will flow down like waters in a mighty stream." It may be that when we really see the widow, our hearts will come alive with generosity.

You don't, of course, have to choose between these two readings. We are, in fact, sometimes the widow and sometimes the judge, just as God is sometimes the widow and sometimes the judge. Richard Rohr encourages us to adopt an "incarnational worldview" which he describes as "the profound recognition of the presence of the divine in literally 'every thing' and 'every one'" (p.18). To see the world this way is to connect widow and judge in such a way that justice happens.

It's interesting to note that the Greek word for justice in this text can also be translated as "righteousness." And if you know anything about the Hebrew understanding of righteousness, you know that righteousness essentially means "right relationship."

So, as we've been saying for several weeks, stewardship is about making connections, seeing ourselves as belonging to the earth, loving our neighbors, and bringing together those who deliver justice with those in need of justice. These relationships aren't always valued. We mistreat the earth. We fear the stranger. We disparage the poor and oppressed. And when we try to change these things, we lose heart.

And yet, we have this great cloud of witnesses, these saints whom we have remembered today. Let us be encouraged to pray always, to persevere, and to seek out the connections that nurture life, and render justice, and embody good stewardship. Amen.

Resources

Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, And Believe*. Convergent Books: New York, NY 2021.

Blog: Pastor Dawn – October 17, 2019.