

Sermon

19th Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday, October 19th, 2025

Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: JEREMIAH 31:27-34, PSALM 119:97-104, 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4:5, LUKE 18:1-8

How many of you like swimming? I love the water. I love wading in it and feeling it swirl around me. I love floating on my back feeling both weightless and held. I love taking a deep breath and diving under the surface...

We need to swim in the readings our lectionary brings us today. We need to wade into these words and let them swirl around us. We need to float in them, and let them hold us. We need to dive under the surface...

We heard of a new covenant in our first reading, from Jeremiah. As we wade into this reading, we remember that these were words of hope offered to a people at a time of profound desolation. This is a covenant that will not require the people to work with teachers, preachers, prophets and priests to learn and keep it. It's the promise of God's faithfulness, written on their hearts. This is a promise of relationship and connection with God - a connection that can be accessed internally, no matter what might be happening externally. This promise of faithfulness is not just for the people of Jeremiah's time - it's for us, too. God's love and faithfulness is written on our hearts. We're invited to feel that promise, to feel that hope with each heartbeat, with each breath. Close your eyes, and breathe in that promise: God is with us, God's faithfulness to us, God's love for us cannot be broken or lost. That promise and faithfulness are as much a part of us as the beating of our hearts. Float on that promise of faithfulness; know that it will keep you afloat when the waters are rough, when the darkness is overwhelming...

We heard in 2nd Timothy that "All scripture is inspired by God...". There are words that have been used to support fundamentalist or literalist understandings

of scripture, and to encourage subservience to authorities who are "competent" to interpret scripture. This doesn't really hold when we consider that Paul's words apply only to the "Old" or First Testament as the New Testament hadn't been written yet. Keeping this in mind, we have to remember that the Hebrew and early Christian understanding of scripture was that it was meant to be part of a lively dialogue - with interpretations emerging to respond to changing times. Scripture was never meant to be an unchanging and infallible document. Inspired means "breathed into". These words are meant to breathe in us - not imprison us! They are meant to energize and motivate, not suffocate. As we wade into these words from the apostle Paul to Timothy, we too can breathe in their encouragement to persist - to keep swimming in the waters of this world - to stay afloat and to speak and act in ways that breathe life into the world - to speak and act in ways that uphold and affirm others rather than in ways that overturn and plunge them into challenging waters that overwhelm.

And our parable this morning. We're told at the outset what the parable is about. Luke tells us that it's about the need to pray always and not to lose heart. On the surface, this is a story about an audacious and persistent woman - a widow - fighting for justice and an unjust judge, giving in to that persistence, that tenacity.

There are various interpretations of the parable. Some suggest that Jesus is using a "how much more" technique. Different commentaries suggest that this is Jesus using a "how much more" technique, effectively saying in this story: *"If even an unjust judge eventually gives in to a persistent request for justice by a woman he neither loves nor respects — how much more will God, the consummately Just Judge, grant justice to God's beloved? So: take heart!"*¹ I wonder about this. Does this set us up to fail? If we haven't had our prayers answered, are we not among God's beloved? If injustices persist, are we not praying effectively? Would a faithful God - a God whose promise to be faithful is written on our hearts, a God who breathes inspiration and life into words to guide us - would this kind of God

¹<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/10/15/faith-on-earth-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-nineteenth-week-after-pentecost>

have us fail this way? There is more going on here, in this story. What happens when we dive under the surface of this interaction between widow and judge?

Author and theologian Amy-Jill Levine does that. She goes under the surface and asks what's really going on here. She points out that we're actually short on details about the widow. What injustice was perpetrated against her? We don't know. The word is translated as "justice" in the NRSV, but the original Greek word more precisely means "avenge" me. The widow may therefore not be looking for justice, but for vengeance - for the person to get the punishment they deserve. We hear the judge say "*...because this widow keeps bothering me...*". This translation as "bother" doesn't encompass the full meaning of the Greek, which translates more appropriately to something like "strike me on the face" or "give me a black eye." Rather than a marginalized widow we might have one with a mean right hook seeking vengeance, and rather than an apathetic judge worn down by persistence, we have one giving in to her to avoid a punch in the face. Has justice been served here, or have both just managed to get what they want? Getting what we want isn't justice, and this cannot be the kind of persistence God is calling us to...

What if God is the persistent one? Sometimes, when I'm swimming, and the water is swirling around, I feel as though it's molding and shaping me. I feel as though it's washing away rough edges, smoothing bumps and soothing bruises. In the deep silence of the water, I can hear my own heartbeat, and in that listening there is space for God, with me. There is recognition that God is always there, as persistent as the beating of my heart. What if prayer is our way to make space for God to mold and shape us, to wash away the rough bits of ourselves that snag and tear, and that hold us back from participating fully with God's mission in the world?

Parables are meant to work in us - they are like a living, breathing organism. As soon as we think we've figured them out and found the so-called moral of the story, we've sucked the life out of them. They are meant to shift our perspective, to have us see things in a new way. Understanding this story of the widow and the

judge as telling us to be audacious and persistent until we get our way isn't anything new - that's not a new way to be in the world. And yet we know that God is always making things new. What if the newness comes in our commitment to allowing ourselves to be made new? What if the newness comes in our making space in ourselves for God's will and for God's mission to unfold in our lives?

This morning, when we pray together, imagine yourself swimming in the waters of God's faithfulness and love. Float - rest - in that love. Dive down into God's faithfulness, and hear that persistent love that is more than we can ask or imagine with you, let it mold you and shape you, and let it unfold in your life in new and varied ways. In Jesus name. Amen.