

Lent 4

Luke 18:1-17

The reading: **“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. 2 He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. 3 And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ 4 For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” 6 And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? 8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”**

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

15 Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. 17 Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

Two parables, one purpose. That's what you see here. Jesus is putting these side-by-side for a reason. These are not telling the same story and you don't learn the same lesson from all of them, but they all contribute to the understanding that Jesus wants you to have. They're different pieces of the same picture, if that makes sense, and they teach us best when they're taken together. The lesson here is simple: We need God for everything, and He is here for us in everything.

That's not much of a lesson, I know, it's about as basic as they come, but the Christian faith isn't about learning new things all the time. Sometimes we forget the important things, and even more so because neediness is not a way that we like to be. When we're needy, we feel deficient, like we're childish and unimportant. That is not so. The Scriptures tell us that when it comes to God, needy

is good, in fact, needy is best. It also tells us what that neediness looks like and is. So this parable is all about cultivating that attitude of need, that helplessness, and providing examples of it.

As I said, neediness is not a thing valued very highly in this day and age. Grown-ups are supposed to act like it. You're supposed to support yourself and those you love, stand up and be a force of good in your community. In this life and on this earth, that's not a bad thing and Christ commends it. It's good to be able to do things for yourself and for others. What Jesus wants you to remember, and He calls your attention to it with these examples, is the limits of that do-it-yourself attitude.

The first example is the persistent widow. The fact that Jesus starts a widow is no accident, they were quite dependent on charity as a rule, but this widow is extra-dependent on this judge's charity because this is something she cannot do for herself. More than that, though, the widow has reached the limits of her powers as an individual. We depend on society and its functions to help us deal with the problems too big for us, and those things are out of our hands just like this judge's judgment is out of the widow's hands. The widow isn't described as crippled or lame, or even infirm from age. She is just a widow. She's got two arms, two legs, but she still needs help with things, and law is one of those things. It's a good example that way.

She is also a good teacher. Jesus points out her persistence as the main trait here, and that's true, but again this helps us understand what we *do* with our neediness. This is why Christian neediness is not the petulant neediness of a spoiled child, waiting to be pandered to, to have everything done for it. We associate those two, I think. Neediness has an arrogance attached to it somehow, that we *deserve* to be attended to. But that's not what this widow does. She needs, sure, but what she needs is what she cannot do herself: Justice. She isn't waiting for it to come to her, she's pestering the one in charge of that sort of thing until he finally gives up and does it. The widow is

letting the judge do the legal thing so we can do the rest.

This is one of the weird things about our self-reliant society. We want to do it all, and that's understandable, but in wanting to do it all, we shove out all the people that could help us do it. Furthermore, we've lost a sense of place and role, because everyone wants to be able to do everything. Now, there's nothing we can do about that, except remember that we don't have to be able to do it all. There's a great deal not under our control that we cannot do. That is what God wants us to remember and that is why Jesus is telling this story.

He wants to remember that He is our ultimate source of good, but He is also our ultimate authority. That we can bring our needs to Him and have Him meet them. Again, there's limits to that. We don't *pray* for food and expect it to appear, we work for it. We don't sit back and expect Him to do everything any more than the widow did. We do what we do here, He does what He does. We take care of the things we can, He takes care of the things we cannot. That is so important to remember, never more so than in a time like this. God isn't asking us to become babies. He's asking us to do what we can do and trust Him with the rest.

One of those things is salvation, demonstrated by the second parable. The sinner trusts that God can and will forgive His sins by the blood of Jesus, and He does. The Pharisee is such a garish, almost silly example of self-satisfaction it feels almost fake, but you all know people like this. You all know people who think they are the cat's meow (spiritual or otherwise!). Jesus isn't just telling us not to be like that, He is telling us to trust Him and depend on Him for salvation, to need salvation from Him.

That's a tougher call. To need salvation from God is to recognize that we are sinners and deserve His wrath and judgment. Those are easy words to say, but getting into that mindset is much harder. Thankfully, that is why we are dependent on God to do it. Jesus promises us that the sinner is

welcomed, and Jesus promises us that He will make us very aware of just how badly of a sinner we are. And He does. According to His Word, we're all doomed to hell. It's that bad. But remembering that, and maintaining the weight of it, is a tough thing indeed. You hear it all the time, that you are a sinner and deserve hell, but you also know that Jesus saves you, so it's hard to make the "hell" part have any impact.

That's where our situation comes in. This coronavirus isn't exactly Ebola or the Black Plague, but it has certainly impacted us. We've got a disease going around that we've never seen before that can effect us in potentially deadly ways. That is one heck of a reminder that we are not living in paradise, we are not living in heaven, we are living in the world that our sin created. Jesus tells us to view all disasters as little reminders of this. Sin is real. It lives in our lungs, in our genes, we breathe it all over the world, and it kills us. You don't need to beat your breast to tell God you're a sinner, and you don't need to look beyond the latest headlines to know that it is a real problem.

Finally, the last parable is no parable at all, but Jesus' admonition to bring the children, which brings this whole lesson around. Like children, we must receive the kingdom of God as though we need it. Like children, we receive the kingdom of God because we can't do it ourselves and we can't understand it ourselves. So what is that kingdom? Jesus and all His work. The work of salvation. The work of maintaining that salvation in us as we go about our day-to-day lives. The work of meeting the needs we cannot meet. All that is encompassed in being part of God's kingdom, and summarized by Jesus.

So what should we do with this? I've discussed that somewhat already. Cultivate your neediness, don't despise the word. Cultivate your need for God's salvation, God's direction, and God's people. The present crisis is probably helping cultivate all of those, and that is something I want you to remember. Not only is church a gift of God but all the things that church gives are God's gifts, and He

wants us to yearn for them. Not only is the service that, but the people are that. So turn your needs over to God. If you are lonely, tell Him. If you are bored, tell Him. If you are scared, tell Him. Then, after you've done that, find someone to help you with those needs, and find someone to help with those needs. Maybe you won't in either case, but these are the things we can do. We need God, and only Jesus can forgive our sins, but one of the gifts God gives us is each other and each other's gifts. Admitting the need for those gifts takes an enormous sacrifice, because we are used to being po-faced and having it all together. But, perhaps this is a time for us to learn how to need. Look to the widow. Look to the child. Look to the sinner beating his chest. These are our teachers.

Lord, teach me to need You.

Amen.