

Ask Boldly, Live Justly

Luke 18:1-8

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
Children's Sabbath — October 16, 2016

I.

Good Morning on this Children's Sabbath Sunday. I brought my pearls today and I'm wearing them because this is going to be a social justice kind of sermon—we're talking about lifting up the poor and vulnerable, boldly making the case for justice. As a student, I attended a truly wonderful women's college in the south, where it was quietly understood that when a young woman was going to speak truth to power, she ought to wear a string of pearls. The wisdom being, that you might appear to be proper while saying something radical. We're talking about children and poverty—this is the Sunday when we lift up the world's children. And we're talking about these things in the context of our faith. This week there will be Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Baha'i communities talking about these same issues in their congregations, at their religious services. So in this moment we are part of a larger concentrated effort by people of faith to consider the question—how are the children doing? It seems like a simple question, one that's asked every day in families around the world—how are the children doing? But this is radical because in many places in our world, children are oppressed, trafficked, and mistreated—it's a reality that is sometimes hard to hear, and often glossed over, especially in churches. So this morning, I invite you to put on your own metaphorical "pearls" and join me in this journey to ask boldly, and live justly.

The Bible frequently uses the image of a widow to denote powerlessness—a widow would have been one of the most vulnerable people anyone could think of in that patriarchal time and place. Jesus tells this parable about a widow approaching someone who admittedly has no faith in God or respect for people—he's an "unjust judge." When he denies her justice, she returns to him again and again. Finally the unjust judge gives in, mainly to make her go away. He says, "I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." He realizes, cunningly, that having a vulnerable widow approaching him for justice and him denying it repeatedly, could be an embarrassment to him. So he gives in, and grants her justice. The unjust judge is not transformed

by the widow, he is not suddenly a “just judge,” he only gives in to avoid his own humiliation as a public figure. Sometimes the right thing happens for all the wrong reasons. Luke tells us that the moral of the story is that if an intolerant and obnoxious ruler can grant justice to a poor widow, how much more will a just God grant mercy and justice to a faithful people. It is a parable to comfort Luke’s audience, to tell them not to lose heart, but to have faith because God is loving and good—and eventually their prayers for the coming of the Kin-dom of God will be answered.

It seems natural to hear this story, and automatically put God in the place of the ruler, and the people in the place of the widow. But this can be a little tricky, if the ruler is an unjust judge—does that mean that God is unjust, or that God somehow puts off hearing the prayers of the people? In so much of the gospels we see Jesus standing with those on the margins, we hear about a Kin-dom of God that is an upside-down realm where the lowly are lifted up, the powerful are brought down from their thrones, the hungry are filled with good things. So I wonder what would happen if we imagine God in the place of the widow? What if the widow in this parable is a metaphor for God, tirelessly calling forth justice from unjust systems? Then God doesn’t “lose heart” but inspires a restlessness among the oppressed in the face of injustice? What would it mean for us to be restless on this Children’s Sabbath Day—it could mean standing alongside grieving parents whose children have been the victims of gun violence, and asking when is it enough? It could mean advocating for equal access in schools (can you believe that’s still a thing?!), it could mean supporting projects that bring a dentist to children in rural areas of the United States (it’s troubling that that’s also a thing). Right here in Sebastopol it could mean standing with the TLC Child & Family Center, right up the road from here across from Andy’s, that has helped so many children and youth through fostering and adoption. A couple of weeks ago, a teenage girl at the TLC fundraising breakfast told the audience of a heartbreaking truth—that when her own family refused to accept her, TLC stepped in to help her build self-esteem, greatly reduce her self-harm, and love her for who she is. Harnessing a sense of restlessness in the face of oppression could mean supporting our church, so that we can continue with our thriving Mission & Outreach programs, homeless lunches, and the Interfaith Food Pantry; so that our church can continue to be a place of sanctuary; so that our church has the resources to create new programs that will invigorate our community and teach our young people about healthy sexuality and relationships. It could mean connecting with that restlessness we feel

when we see someone in need, and using the resources we have to change the systems that cause poverty—especially child poverty—in the world today.

II.

When I drive around town in my mini-van with my four children, we're usually packed in with backpacks and school instruments (an upright bass, a cello, a violin), sometimes a bicycle, a dog, and let's not forget there needs to be space for the four kids, too. I am aware of my own privilege living in this country, and the privilege that my children were born into—that they have access to school, music, and bicycles. Sometimes there are burrito wrappers and clothes full of sand from the beach, sometimes there are voices crying out to go to the library (please please please) or to go straight home to play. But sometimes, when the van is full of objects but I am the only heartbeat in the car, I like to listen to the radio. This week when I had that rare quiet moment, I heard a commentary from Alan Lessik, a San Francisco novelist, figure skater, zen practitioner. And I'm going to read you part of what he said. He was talking about healing trauma in his own life, as it's been retriggered by recent news reports of verbal assaults on women, African-Americans, Latinos, immigrants, Muslims, and LGBT folks, that has left a feeling of danger and the recollection of previous trauma. He says this: "I define trauma as the unfinished story of pain that reaches deep into every part of our physical being." He says, "As a writer and storyteller, I have learned the power of rewriting the trauma in my body. Oddly enough, it is the power of grief that can bring us back to life." It is the power of grief that can bring us back to life. The widow of our story must have lost her husband, we don't know much about her, but we do know that her husband has died. And this woman, exposed in her poverty as she is, she gathers up her grief and channels it toward obtaining justice. She uses the strength of her sorrow as a tool to bring her back to life. The process of repeatedly attending to her sorrow is what ultimately heals her. Perhaps the unjust judge is an internal metaphor for the widow, and perhaps for us too—I have an unjust judge in my mind that comes out more often than I would like, I'm guessing most of us do—that voice that tells us we aren't good enough or beloved enough or confident enough or calm enough... But the way to overcome that real or imagined unjust judge is to repeatedly go through the process of gathering up our sorrows, our trauma, our brokenness, to gather them up (not forgetting or ignoring them), but to let them wash over us so that our trauma and brokenness may be transformed, indeed we

may be transformed. Sometimes we may need a guide or a community like the church to accompany us in the process of transforming our brokenness. Alan Lessik concludes, "We live, knowing that our bodies and our mind will reintegrate this new way of being to create our next story, the story of how we survived, how we overcame and how we regained our power and were born anew." This is what the widow of our story does—she takes the trauma of her past and using the alchemy of repetition, transforms her pain into justice. Instead of leaning away from her grief and position in life, the widow leans in—by going to the unjust judge she puts herself in close proximity to injustice, trusting that if she goes right at it, full on, she might someday manage to work through it. Perhaps the widow represents the tender, vulnerable parts of our selves, that when persistently approached without losing heart, have the power to transform us.

But what if the unjust judge is not only internal, but external? Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* wrote recently about the atrocities in Syria. He interviewed a seven-year-old girl, Bana al-Abed, and her mother Fatemah, who have been tweeting about their daily lives in Aleppo, Syria. "One tweet shows a video clip of Bana looking out the window and plugging her ears as bombs drop. 'I am very afraid I will die tonight,' she worried.... 'This bombs will kill me now.'" No child should have to live like this. It seems that the Syrian-Russian strategy is to isolate and starve civilians like Bana and Fatemah, to starve them into submission, as Nicholas Kristof says, "so that they flee or no longer support the opposition." God, the Bible has persistently insisted, gives special attention to those who are most vulnerable; therefore, we should persist in our complaints, even to the point of embarrassing the powers that be in order to induce change. That will be true no matter who becomes our next president—the refugee crisis will go on, and people like Bana and Fatemah will need people from outside their country to take action to save them.

III.

Our church is part of the United Church of Christ, UCC—we are a denomination steeped in justice, it's part of our congregation's DNA. Our new members today made a promise to "resist oppression and violence, to show love and justice, and to embody the work and word of Jesus Christ" as best as they are able. Those are big words! Those promises point to our church's commitment to the widow, however she may show up in our world or in our lives. We acknowledge that we may have blind spots, and then we as a church actively seek out ways that we can stand alongside the literal and metaphorical widow among us. We remain faithful in our commitment to bring love and justice into the world, in whatever small or large ways we can.

So when you're sifting through the layers of your own sorrow, or arguing with the unjust judge in your mind, remember the parable of the persistent widow, and let your own brokenness speak to the broken places in our world. Let your heart stay open to the possibility that change can happen. Keep working for justice even when it seems no solution is near. In other words, keep your pearls on. When you hear about the next atrocity that happens to children in Syria, keep your pearls on. When you vote this November, keep your pearls on. When you see photos of girls wanting to go to school in Afghanistan, or children who need dental care in rural Kentucky, or whose homes were destroyed in a hurricane, keep your pearls on. Continue in the ways of the persistent widow, to ask boldly and live justly. Amen.