

Stewardship is Sharing

Luke 18:1-8

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

October 20, 2019, Children's Sabbath

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(The parable of the persistent widow.) Perhaps it is because I usually find myself surrounded by children, but my first thought upon reading the scripture for today, was that of the persistent nagging of a child who really wants something that they shouldn't have, and the reluctant giving in of an adult who just wants a little peace. But this parable isn't a story about a nagging child and a well-meaning but tired adult. Rather, this parable, Luke tells us, is about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.

The characters in this story are a widow and a judge. The widow is the disadvantaged character, without a husband to provide for her and unable to inherit property, she is poor, vulnerable and dependent on others. The judge is a symbol of power, with the ability to settle disputes and restore justice. But this judge has no respect for people and does not fear God. In our story, the widow repeatedly comes to the judge demanding justice. And in the end, the unjust judge finally grants her justice from a place of irritation rather than goodness.

As we look at the passage from the gospel of Luke, it's important for us to consider where this falls in the book as well as some context. The text was written a couple of generations after Jesus' death. Both in the preceding chapter as well as later in chapter 18, we see texts about the promise of the kingdom of God. Seven verses after our parable for today is the story of Jesus welcoming and blessing the children and proclaiming that God's kingdom belongs to them. Luke's audience would've been a people who were being oppressed by the Roman government, who were trying to figure out how live out Christ's work and teachings in the world after his death. These people were persecuted and were likely praying for the kingdom of God to arrive on earth and deliver them from pain and suffering. This text was written to vulnerable and disadvantaged people that had been beaten down by the powers that be for generations with no end in sight.

Today is Children's Sabbath, and as you heard earlier, we gather to celebrate the children in our midst but also to recognize the hardships that children face. This year we call specific attention to "childhood poverty" and the consequential effects. Earlier in the service, we heard statistics that remind us that **18% of our nation's children live in poverty** (that number is 33% for children African American or American Indian children). **In a country of affluence and influence, this is unacceptable.** I want you to picture these children in your head...these are children who are living hard and complicated lives. Children who know too well the feeling of an empty stomach and uncertainty as to where their next meal will come from; children who are homeless or at risk for homelessness; children who lack proper supervision and guidance end up in the criminal justice system; children who are abused and neglected; children whose parents aren't able to care for them; or parents who despite working multiple jobs, aren't able to provide for their basic needs; these are children who aren't in school, or who struggle with basic skills like reading. These are children who are more likely to be injured and die in accidents because they tend to live in homes without working smoke detectors, more open flames, unsafe stairs and windows. Children with physical and mental health issues but no resources to receive treatment.

When we talk about poverty, it's important to know that the effects of poverty are long reaching and go beyond a meal today or clothes for tomorrow. Any time spent in poverty as a child, means you are significantly more likely to experience poverty as an adult. Children living in poverty face long term educational setbacks; they are less likely to graduate from high school and less likely to attend college. They suffer long term effects on their physical, mental and emotional health. They are more likely to develop obesity and asthma. The **stress** children experience in poverty **is toxic** and has **permanent effects** on brain structure and growth – which impacts their ability to learn, solve problems and control impulses –imagine how much impact that has on their ability to hold a job... or have stable relationships... or be good parents as adults.

Childhood poverty is an epidemic of critical proportions and children suffer the effects for the rest of their lives. But these are not just some children on a poster or in a faraway place. These are children in our community, and communities like ours throughout the country. Today, I remind you that each and

every one of these is a child of God. But these children of God are vulnerable, they are dependent on people who don't have the resources to take care of them, they are taken advantage of because they are young. Children for whom the systems that are put into place to protect them, fail them. For one in five children in our country, this is their reality, day in and day out. **In a country of affluence and influence, this is unacceptable.** These children are the victims of our broken world.

Where are we at? What are we to do? The numbers are big and the problems are complex. (Can you see the similarities between the widow in our parable and the children of poverty in our world? Disadvantaged, vulnerable, dependent.) Let me read verse 1 of our scripture for today, "1 Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit." [Luke 18:1]. Is the answer prayer?

Prayer is time we spend in communion with God. We offer prayer in the still quiet of our lives and we ask God to move through us to relieve children of poverty. We pray out loud in worship and with our families, for the suffering of children to be lifted. We pray with our hands, as we write letters to legislators, pleading for them to support the most vulnerable in our midst. We pray with our hands as we sort food and stock shelves at the food pantry. We pray with our feet as we march and stand in protest of systems that are unjust and further suppress the disadvantaged. We pray with our minds as we educate ourselves and vote for leadership that we think will make a difference to the many in our country who are hurting. We pray with our bodies as we pack meals to feed hungry children all over the world.

And we aren't the only ones – there are others trying to help. Teachers who stock their desks with snacks and socks and toothpaste and social workers who spend unpaid hours devoted to caring for the discarded children of our world. We hear about Champale Anderson, a mom in St Louis, who packs 100 "sack lunches" every day for the children in her neighborhood. Meals these kids get from a table in front of her home as they get off the school bus, because otherwise there would be no food for them until they go back to school the next day. We hear about Dustin Wright, a man in Virginia who was

distressed when he heard that high school kids in his town were being made to put back their school lunches because their lunch accounts were empty. He set up a fundraiser, eventually collecting more than \$8000 for lunch accounts at the local schools so kids could eat. We hear about Lucy and Salina, who set up Houses Into Homes in Iowa City after being disheartened hearing about the number of children in our community who sleep on the floor, because their families can't afford beds. In 18 months, they have helped furnish homes for over 400 children, giving them comfortable places to eat and sleep and live – at no cost to their families.

Last week, Pastor Jill spoke of the importance of stewardship – reminding us how we are called into partnership with God to care for each other. How we are not just called, but we are responsible as individuals and as a church community to care for the young and old, the weak and the sick, the victims of discrimination and injustice. We are charged with caring for the widows and children – the least among us. And we are responsible to share the abundance we have, not just because it's the nice thing to do but also because over and over in scripture, we are called to share what we have:

Luke Chapter 3: "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." [Luke 3:11 ESV]

First John chapter 3: But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? [1 John 3:17]

And Hebrews: Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. [Hebrews 13:16]

...just to mention a few.

As stewards of this earth and all the people on it, we do what we can to care for each other and share what we have. We collect winter coats and boots for the children in our community who would otherwise spend the winter months cold and unprotected from winter temperatures and bitter wind. We collect peanut butter, macaroni and other kid-friendly foods to stock the local food pantries during the summer months when poverty can be felt more deeply. Today, we collected tableware for small children – to help families who aren't able to afford such necessities. We do diaper drives and we

partner with Habitat for Humanity. This summer we collected more than \$800 to purchase two families washing machines for their homes. We do our best to meet the specific needs of individuals who come to us asking for help. We volunteer at local schools, reading with children who need extra help or interpreting so that parents and teachers can partner together in education.

Like the widow in our parable, we persist - we share what we can of our time, our money, our talents, and our resources, over and over and over, for **as long as there are still many who have too much and others with not enough, our work is not done**. It is not easy to keep up the good fight and we will become discouraged. There will be times when it feels like the hour spent at the food pantry, or the monetary donation, the hot meal served or the hours spent in protest - *haven't made any difference*. Times when our contribution feels like one tiny drop in a giant bucket. We are called to end child poverty, but there will be times when the problem seems too massive and we are tempted to look the other way...times when we may give up hope.

Maybe we have something in common with the people Luke was writing to – have we grown weary of demanding justice and waiting for things to change?

“1 Jesus told them a story about their need to pray always and not lose heart.”

Children's Sabbath is not just about awareness, it is about action...and **our work is not done**. We must persist...so we commit to doing one good thing every day. We pray consistently with our minds, hearts, hands and feet. We pray with our voices as we stand up for and empower those who are oppressed. We care for those who have less. We share our gifts and our abundance. But this is not a journey we make on our own, rather we bind ourselves together to be forces of healing in our hurting world. And we can rest in the comfort of our loving and generous God, who walks with us each and every step of the way.

Care for each other. Persist in prayer. Share abundantly. And do not lose hope.

Amen.