

Trusting in God even when...
Luke 18:1-8

Have you ever been disappointed in God? Even just a little? There is an old adage that says it's difficult to remember your job is to drain the swamp when you are surrounded by alligators. To place this in the spiritual realm, sometimes it's difficult to remember that Christ has won the victory for us when we feel as if life holds more pain than promise, when we feel as if our prayers rise no higher than the ceiling, sometimes it feel difficult to proclaim God's grace when our own life seems so gloomy.

The Bible tells us the words Jesus spoke, but it does not tell us all that Jesus said and did. As the Gospel of John tells us, *"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."*

So, we are left, I presume, with those words of Jesus that had special meaning, special truth, special help for the communities to which Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote. And this strange parable, which begins with calling us to persistent prayer and ends with Jesus wondering if there will still be faith when he returns, is written to a community that itself seems to be in despair.

Despair, because God has not come through for them the way they had hoped. The very early church, the church that was launched in those first few months after Pentecost, had

been filled with anticipation, anticipation that Jesus would soon return and bring history to a righteous conclusion. There were high hopes for a new world, a new order, a new righteousness, when those dreams of peace and wholeness would come true.

But days became months and months became years, and things looked very much the same. There were still widows, widows who were not allowed to inherit their husband's property, going before indifferent judges to make sure they received what they were supposed to receive. There was persecution from the Roman authorities, religious arguments with Pagans on the one hand and Jewish people on the other.

And that community to which Luke wrote, and many other communities thereafter, including ours, grabbed on to what Jesus taught, and found hope and inspiration to persevere.

The parable seems to explain itself: Jesus told them about their need to pray and not lose heart. Jesus presents a scenario, one that perhaps would have special resonance then and now: living in a world in which injustice still rears its ugly head. Think, he said, if you will about a widow who is being mistreated. The family, which was obligated to take care of her, was not. Acting so wrongly that they had become her adversaries.

Now the widow is a symbol of the lost and the least. In those days widows simply did not have much social standing. So she does what she must: she goes before a judge, asking for justice. Then Jesus says, but suppose it isn't a very good judge. He's one who does not fear

God, does not regard himself as answerable to God, and has no respect for any other person or authority. In other words, he's the last judge in the world who would care about justice, who would care about this widow, scraping by on the margins of life.

The widow has no resources, except for one. She is persistent. She is persistent in nagging the judge as we are to be persistent in prayer. And finally the judge relents: He thinks to himself, I don't care about God, I don't care about justice, I don't even care about her, but to get her off my back, I'll give her the justice she demands.

Then Jesus says, if an unjust judge will grant justice because of persistence, then how much more will God, who loves justice, loves us, grant what we need when we are persistent in our prayer.

Now, God is different from the judge: it is not our persistent nagging, our persistent prayer that moves God; it is God's love for us, his care for us, that moves God to give us what we need.

We are to pray persistently. We are to pray believing. We are to pray trusting. Not to convince God, not to change God's mind, but in prayer we keep our faith strong to receive and to understand and to discern the blessings when they come our way.

And one could digress just a moment to say that this is why Christian community is so

important: that in our communal prayer time and in our shared fellowship, we encourage and inspire one another to keep believing.

And it's persistence in prayer that leads us to trust God even when evidence of God's gracious power for the moment is tough to come by. It is persistence in prayer that allows the people of Christ to trust in God's future when the present seems so tenuous. It's persistence in prayer that makes us believe in Sunday's resurrection even as we face Friday's cross.

And that's the parable: God is faithful to us, God knows what is best for us, the blessings of God are ours, no matter what the circumstance. Through persistent prayer, we trust the alligators will not devour us, we trust God will in fact find a way for us to drain that swamp.

And would that the parable had ended here, on this strong note of affirmation, that in our persistent prayer and faithful living, our faith is not in vain, that God knows us, hears us, and responds to us.

But the parable does not end here, with strong affirmation, but rather with an unsettling: when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

That is, do we as Christians, the Body of Christ, have the conviction, have the courage, to persist in our faith, to persist in prayer, no matter what?

Jesus knew his disciples, and I suppose, later on, the church, would face obstacles, face challenges that would test their resolve, and so his question (will there be faith when I return?) is both a warning - of difficult times- and a challenge - to remain faithful and trusting, no matter how deep the swamp and how numerous the alligators.

I remember back in my junior year of high school, when I was on the Junior Varsity football team. I was not very good, what I lacked in size and strength, I made up for in slowness. I played in the defensive line, for, among other reasons the fact that I had only one pair of glasses and dared not wear them on the football field, lest they be broken. Anyway, on the Thursday before one of our big games, the coach decided that we would practice without shoulder pads.

We came on the field; he looked at us and said, "Without your pads on, you look really scrawny. I'm not sure I dare let any of you on the field Saturday."

That motivated us. The fact that our coach wondered about our ability made us look again into our selves, made us dig deep into ourselves. We might be scrawny, but we cared, we were ready for the challenge.

Saturday came, and we were ready. We all played about as hard as we had ever played. I even got into the game, 3rd string that I was, and even made a tackle that stopped our opponents from making a first down. We played the game of our lives, because we did not

want to disappoint our coach. We wanted to show we were not too scrawny, not too small, not too weak, to compete against the odds.

In other words, we persisted. We gave it everything we had. And at the end of the game, the scoreboard , not that I could read it, read something like 33 to 7. We had given the coach everything we had. By the way, we were the team with 7. But the next week, we won.

But back to the parable. Persist. Persist. Persist in prayer, persist in living the life Christ has called us to live, even when we feel too scrawny, too small, even when the odds seem so against us. So, if Jesus should come back this afternoon, may it be that He will indeed find faith, indeed find that we were persistent, no matter what the challenge, no matter that the world or the ungodly forces seem so strong.

Sort of like that football game. Except for this. When we persist in prayer, persist in living as Christ's people, the outcome is not in doubt. For Christ has already won the victory.

If we dare to believe it. Dare to live it.