

Sermon: October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019- "Are you listening God? Are we listening God?"

A couple weeks ago, I was cleaning up my yard for what felt like the immediate arrival of winter, and my sons were inside playing a video game. I decided to give them an hour more to play and then have them join me because as the saying goes, many hands make light work. When the hour time limit arrived, I opened the door and called to the boys, they replied, "Yes dad," and I said, "Time to shut it off and come and help me with the yard work." The answer I received was short and simply, "Yup." Now I wasn't certain what that "yup" meant; its either meant, "yup, we heard you and will be there ASAP." Or it meant, "Yup" as in they didn't actually listen to me at all, but felt the necessity to respond with something.

I decided to give them the benefit of the doubt and went back outside to work, hoping that they would join me momentarily. Ten minutes later, no hands, no light work. And so, I went back into the house, and called out again, only this time I said, "Hey boys, did you hear me? Shut it off and come outside." The response once again, "yup." This time, though, instead of heading back outside alone, I decided to sit on the step and give them the one minute it should take to shut off a TV and venture outside. That one minute passed and I then went down stairs to discover all three of them still playing the game and not even the least bit concerned that their father, who I have no doubt looked a bit putt off, was now standing in front of them blocking the screen.

"Are you not listening to me," I said. "What do you mean?" One of then replied. "Well I have called you twice now to come upstairs and both time you replied yup." Oh, sorry they said, "We didn't hear you." Needless to say, the remainder of that day did not include screen time for any of them. Now I am not going to profess to be a saint, I am sure that if my father

was present here today, he would suggest that I also responded to him this way numerous times growing up and I can remember him saying at least a few times are you listening to me? I also know that from time to time I do this in adulthood, that someone will ask me something and I will acknowledge that they have spoken to me, but will not have fully listened to the request. So, its not just kids that struggle with listening, from time to time, we all do.

But when it comes to our faith, one of the main questions that we all ask time and time again, particularly in rough patches, is whether or not God is listening? Because it most certainly feels like there have been times in my life, when I have prayed earnestly and deeply for God to move in my life, and I don't get the sense that my prayer was responded to, or even heard. Maybe you have asked this question about God as well, is God listening?

Jesus disciples, I would suggest likely felt this way as well. Just before our passage today, Jesus has been describing to his disciples what some folks like to refer to as a theology of the end times. But I think a better understanding of what was taking place at the end of chapter 17, is not so much Jesus creating or adhering to a certain theology, but more so Jesus expressing to them the importance of keeping a hopeful faith in the midst of present ordeals. Which is why the opening of our passage today, says, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

The parable that Jesus tells them, is one that you likely have heard before. It describes a widow and how she persistently demanded justice to be upheld by a judge. Now we know nothing about the injustice that has taken place that this widow is so concerned about, we really don't even know much about the widow, only that she perceives an injustice and refuses to

let the judge ignore her pleas. What we do know is that the judge is some one who neither feared God nor had respect for people.”

Immediately we don't overly like this character in the parable. He seems like a mean guy and we start to cheer for the widow. And her persistence pays off. However, the judge is not moved by injustice that has taken place, but is frankly annoyed at widow's persistence and finally relents. The judge is even quoted as saying, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out continually coming.”

Jesus then brings the parable home for his disciples; offers them an interpretations of the words, remembering that this passage is prefaced with the need to have hopeful faith in the face of an ordeal; Jesus says to them and us who read it much later, “And will not God grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry to God day and night? Will God delay long, in helping them?” Jesus seemingly answers those two questions by saying, “I tell you; God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the son of humanity comes, will he find faith on earth?”

It seems then, by Jesus words and by the preface to the parable written by the author of Luke, that Jesus point is one of encouragement. It seems as though he is encouraging his disciples to have the persistence of the widow. That they must be persistent in their prayers to God and not give up, for God will answer, and unlike the judge in the parable, God will answer in a timely way and with grace and compassion; God will always respond to the needs of those who call upon God. Which is a great and wonderful message not just for the disciples, but for us all. It's one we all need to hear and honestly one I believe. I do in fact believe that God hears

our prayers and answers. I have no doubt of that, what struggle with though, is the reality of us. The reality which I have already noted, which is that we are often not that great at listening.

Which leads me to point out that this passage today is a parable, not a story. What's the difference you might wonder? Well a story has a point upon which all that comes before it heads to. A story is crafted to deliver a message, or a point of view, but a parable is used to specifically cause food for thought; it is designed to cause the listener to reflect on ones own reality, within the context of the message; meaning that parables do not always have a specific designed point that is needed to be shared or a conclusion. The conclusion or point can be multiple things; different meanings that we need to hear at different times. So absolutely the point of Jesus parable could be, that we need to have persistence and the patience of the widow in our prayers to God. It seems to answer, the question of are you listening God? With a firm yes, not yup, but a clear yes, I am listening to your needs and will respond.

But this parable could also mean something else. The last line hints at another option, one that I think is rather timely. The final words of this parable about the widow and judge are, "And yet, when the son of humanity comes, will he find faith on earth?" Now sure that could be read as will Jesus find us filled with hope and faith like the widow; but it could also mean something different, it could be a critique of our own question about whether God is listening or not? Maybe instead of the question being God you are listening? The question Jesus wants us to ask, is God are we listening?

I already mentioned that the character of the judge does not sounds like the greatest of people, in fact the parable presents the judge in that way, saying that the judge, "did not fear God, nor have respect for people." Thought the text does not suggest that God is like the judge,

quite the contrary actually, Jesus suggest that God will respond much quicker, we still assume that God fill the role of the judge in the parable and we are supposed to be like the widow. But what if Jesus's point, flips that script? What if God is the widow, patiently and persistently speaking to us, calling out to us, answering us with call for justice, calls to love, calls to respond to the world in hope and joy, calls to see grace everywhere and we are the judge, unwilling to listen, unwilling to rule with justice, and only do so from time to time, when the persistence of God, moves us to do so?

I cannot help but ask if this parable is Jesus way of asking his disciples, then and now, are you actually listening? Are we hearing the persistent cries of the marginalized and needy? Are we ignoring the call for justice, the call for change, the call for God's kingdom to made present? Are we listening? Are we acting as the judge does, only when it suits our needs and wants, rather than acting quickly for the needs of another? When we ask is God listening, maybe we should be asking are we? Are we listening to what God is asking of us everyday? Or are we simply answering with a yup when it suits our needs?

Quite often when I have the opportunity to sit with someone and they ask me that question, does God listen to our prayers, I always answer by saying yes. But if the situation is one in which I can challenge a little bit I often follow that yes with a question of my own, "Are you prepared for the answer to be something other then what you want?" You see I think that's the crux. We listen for what we want to hear, rather then what we need to hear. Now I am not suggesting that we do this all the time, something we do hear God's word in our lives quite clearly, even when it isn't what he hoped it would be, but more often then not I am not sure we

do. More often than not I think we respond like my children did, by responding to suggest that we have heard, but continue to do what we want regardless.

Now I said this was timely, because if you didn't know there is an election tomorrow, and though I will not talk politics from this pulpit, I will comment that this election campaign has been nasty. And one where it has become very easy to hear what we want to hear and very easy to ignore the rest; even if the rest is really important. It timely because our current reality is one where humanity is increasingly divided, sides are being determined by a number of means and if you think or feel one way, then you are discarded completely.

It timely because the need for justice and compassion and care is at all time high. And are we listening? Are we listening to God and are listening to one another? And if we are then we must also be ready to act. That is, I believe the question this parable holds for us today, not are you persistent in your prayers and hopeful in your faith, but are you listening to the word of God which patiently and persistently is calling out to us all? And the truth my friends is that, just like my children and myself discovered, yup is not a good enough answer to the persistent call for justice and compassion from God. Are we listening? For that is what Jesus ask us. For if we truly are, then our actions must follow. May each of us listen closely and act in way that have meaning and grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.