

SERMON – 19TH PENTECOST
LUKE 18:1-8
OCTOBER 20, 2019

"AND THE WINNER IS...."

Saturday evening TV in my home when I was a kid pretty much came down to one of two choices - Lawrence Welk or All-Star Wrestling. At 6:00 either mom got Lawrence and "*Normah Simmer*" or my brother and I got "*The Crusher and The Bruiser*." And since poor mom had to fix supper at that hour most of the time my brother and I got to see the wrestlers (or shall I say large, impolite, ugly male actors) quite a bit. Most wrestling matches I remember featured a villainous brute versus a colossal underdog - these were simply not fair fights.

But they weren't intended to be fair. Fairness doesn't get ratings – a business model WWF "Smackdown" has made a fortune exploiting. Nobody tunes in to see fair- not in pro wrestling at least! My brother and I were only mildly interested in seeing if some imported Frenchman name Jacque might unmask Mad Dog Vachon or his brother "the Butcher" in a tag team match. What attracted us to our TV sets were the enormously long odds of success for the good guy, and the outrageously unfair tactics of the bad guy.

Jesus describes a match in our lesson today – let's call it "*hard hearted judge vs. whinney widow*." In one corner, "da judge" who is able to decide cases and get his decisions enforced. In his intro Jesus adds; *he neither feared God nor respected humans*". What a foe! In the other corner "the widow" – what an underdog. So the storyline sets up as a smack-down by Jesus of the state of the court system in Israel, and for that Jesus had cards to play. Isaiah 1:17 for example commanded Israel to "*seek justice...plead the case of the widow*" and all over the Old Testament God warns against denying someone justice, particularly judges who took bribes.

Nevertheless, it came to the point in Jesus' time where the testimony of Jewish women was not allowed in Jewish courts, a fact apparently lost on all the gospel writers who report that Jewish women were the first witnesses of the resurrection – but that's another story! The facts of this case are nonetheless absurd. This is not a fair fight Jesus describes, but alas it wasn't intended to be. Luke so much as tells us that right from the start. So despite appearances to the contrary, the parable is not a critique of judicial practices but of the paramount importance of God's people to pray. Faith will not always encounter fair – so faith has to pray.

Jesus wants the situation to sound as impossible as possible so that he might ask a penetrating question –one that both the widow and the judge have to answer - "*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth*"? Elsewhere, Jesus commends "childlike faith" – innocent and trusting, but here he commends "widow like faith" tough, determined, persevering. Unlike some parables, this is a happy ending one. The widow gets what she seeks – a hearing and some

implied measure of justice - a judge who does not fear God overtaken by a woman who does not fear the judge. Gotta love it!

In 1976 Glen Campbell released a song titled "Rhinestone Cowboy". The world in which this urban cowboy lived was one where "*nice guys get washed away like the snow and the rain.*" Hope was expressed like this - "*There's been a load of compromising on the road to my horizon - but I'm gonna be where the lights are shining on me.*" Our widow didn't compromise - even if her situation would have suggested some were inevitable - even practical. Yes, Christians by grace through faith will one day be where the light will perpetually shine on us - the light of glory. But then there's the meantime. Jesus directs our attention to that uncomfortable truth with this parable of an incredibly unfair fight - then gets to the punch line - our Lord never misses an opportunity to get at us with the law - "*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith?*"

Will he find faith? Well, he ought to we might opine - he put in us. I thought that was all taken care of, a gift of the Holy Spirit tied up with a nice tidy bow in baptism? This is where the parable gets edgy. You see it would be nothing to tell a story about how God favors the weak over the strong and get us to nod in approval. Jesus interest is in whether ours be a faith that only rests in the blessed assurance that Jesus is mine, or a faith that when and where called upon might duke it out with unjust practices of the...unjust?

Hard hearted in our story fingered a judge who was whole heartedly opposed God - and in our day that could be said of a lot of people and practices. But it can just as easily finger folks who are half-hearted in their commitment to God or wholly indifferent to the whole enterprise of religion. The widow teaches us that faith is not a tactic - it's a way of life. The unjust judge relents in this story, but he doesn't go away, change his disposition, and he isn't converted. He still doesn't fear God or care much for others. Faith will have to contend against the likes of this judge and the injustice they cause.

What can we do? What action might this story call us to? Soon we'll be talking about commitment to the work of our Lord through our congregation - asking you again for the persistent generosity that serves as a witness against a world that can be so unforgiving and hard. In our giving our Lord "*finds faith on earth.*" Giving is the verdict that declares kindness will get a hearing from us. Giving, as a confession of faith, bears the traits the widow in our story showed - conviction, persistence, the belief that God's kingdom and his will is going to be, in fact is being done, on earth as in heaven - to which we add the trait the ol' judge clearly lacked - generosity and concern for the neighbor!

Let that be what our Lord finds us up to all the time. AMEN