

“Who Is Waiting on Whom?”

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our faith might be renewed to persevere being your people, seeking justice. In Jesus' name, Amen.

My friends, I am so full. Having attended our first in-person Regional Assembly in four years, I have been filled up, with hope, with ideas, with wisdom shared by our speakers and others I had the chance to catch up with this weekend. Such a state makes me want to teach. Our scriptures are clearly offering us a lesson – more than one, perhaps – in perseverance and hope and humility. But every opportunity to explore scripture can also be an opportunity to learn about how to explore scripture, and I want to do just a little bit about that.

One of the things I find people enjoy when they come to a Disciples church after having been immersed in a more rigid tradition is the way we hold scripture lightly, with interest and delight and openness to wonder, but also with courage and even occasionally cheekiness. That is to say, we're not afraid to name the elephants in the room or point out what is not said. We're not afraid to imagine beyond the words on the page. And we're dedicated to both wondering about the impact the lesson might have had in its original context and to applying it appropriately in our own circumstances. Scripture is not an idol for Disciples. We can examine it, ask questions of it, challenge it, and even laugh along with it. I give thanks for this.

So the first tool I want to introduce today is the idea of noticing contradictions. Sometimes people read scripture passages that have obvious contradictions, and it's done with an unspoken consensus that we shouldn't say anything out loud about the fact that what we just read is telling us to opposing things. Now, often these contradictions resolve themselves in the wonderful grace of the "both/and," where multiple things that seem like opposites can all be true at the same time. But sometimes, the contradictions stubbornly remain, as a reminder to us that faith is never cut and dried. I will leave it to you to decide which way today's contradictions go.

In our gospel passage, the narrator sets up Jesus' parable by saying he was teaching them "about their need to pray always and not lose heart." But at the end of the passage, Jesus contrasts God with the unjust judge saying that God "will quickly grant justice." So which is it? Are we in for a long slog, demanding heroic levels of persistence in prayer? Or is God going to be right here, ready to answer the moment we call? Is this one of those mysterious instances of "God's time"? Can it help us trust that our perseverance is going to pay off any moment now?

In the passage from Jeremiah, there is another small instance of a mixed message. God says that there is going to be a new covenant. We brace momentarily for a different set of requirements, a new version of the terms of agreement. But it turns out that God is talking about that same old covenant of the Israelites being God's people; it's just that this time, they're not going to break the covenant.

I want to pause here and interject another thing to watch for when reading scripture. Perhaps the most important thing we can keep in mind when reading the Bible is to watch for what it is telling us about God. And do you hear it there, in those words from Jeremiah? Do you hear the passionate longing in God's voice? For a covenant that the people won't break? For faithfulness the likes of which has not yet appeared within humanity? It's almost heart-breaking, this unrequired desire of God to be in relationship with God's people. So often we describe God as loving or powerful or forgiving or creative. But longing? Can you imagine what it would be like to be in relationship with a longing God? To know in your bones that God's greatest desire is for us to be in faithful relationship with God? Sigh. Just let that sink into your soul for a moment.

Alright, now we're going to get back into teaching mode. Because this next tool is a little more technical. I even made a diagram! But I'm not going to make you draw it for yourself like our teacher did at Regional Assembly this weekend, unless you want to. Although, if you were to jot it down and keep it, it could be a fruitful thing to do when you're reading scripture on your own. The question we're going to look at is "Who are all the 'people' in this story?" And our method here suggests that most of the time, there are layers of people to identify.

For a passage like the one we read today from Luke, we'll start with the most obvious layer: the characters in the parable. In this instance, that includes the unjust judge, who neither feared God nor had respect for people, and the widow seeking

justice. This story is primarily about the dynamic of pestering and eventual relenting that is going on between the two of them.

The next layer of people in this story are found around the edges of the passage: Jesus and the disciples, or whoever his audience is. It's important to remember that this layer is actually two layers, because there's Jesus and his audience from the story and in the background, there is the gospel writer and the gospel writer's audience. It may be that Jesus' disciples needed a lesson in perseverance. But it's even more likely that Luke's congregation needed assurance that God had not abandoned them. These same dynamics are, of course, also present in the passages we read from the prophets, as we are learning in our Bible study this fall.

You could spend a lot of time on this double layer, but I want to move onto the next one. You would think the circle would keep moving outward, but I think the next layer is actually between that inner circle of the characters and the double layer of the O/one telling the story and the audience. One of the most important things to look for when reading scripture are the invisible characters, because they will lead us to important questions, and they may fill in gaps that have kept us from fully receiving the story as relevant to our lives. Many, perhaps most of us have never had to repeatedly plead with a judge for justice. Most of us will never be in the position of that judge. So who are the invisible people in this story? Certainly, there is the opponent the widow mentions. But another question is who on earth made this terrible man a judge? The story is very clear that he had no fear of God and no

respect for anyone. So why would anyone think he was an appropriate person to issue judgments on God's people? How did he come to have this power? Judges are not warriors who claim their authority by conquering others. They are appointed or elected or named by someone else. As we approach an election in a system where we are invited to vote for judges, whom we often know little about, we may find ourselves most readily in the position of some of the invisible characters in this story.

When we turn to Jeremiah, and even as we read the Book of the Twelve, the so called "Minor Prophets," we do well to look again for the invisible characters. So often the prophets are commentating about God's relationship with God's people, as in this passage from Jeremiah. Too often, that leads us to imagine "the people" as one unit, a monolith behaving the same way. And yet, there is usually a clear distinction drawn by the prophets. There are the people God is upset or disappointed in – the ones who are in charge, who have authority over the lives of others and are frequently neglecting to care for the vulnerable and the poor. And then there are the vulnerable and the poor. They are all God's people, but they are not all guilty. One portion of God's people are the victims of the others. And it's clear who God is interested in defending. When this distinction is not obvious, it's important that we make it plain. No longer will there be teachers, God says, people who have authority over others because they supposedly have better knowledge of God's will. Instead, everyone will know me; everyone will be an authority on my forgiveness and love.

The last layer of the people in any given story from the Bible are those who are farthest removed. That layer, of course, is us. We are part of the story. It is vital that we remember that we are distant from the center. There are chasms of cultural and historical differences that mean we must take care when inserting ourselves into the story. But it is for us also. God has invited us to know divine grace and love, to have that wisdom housed in our hearts as well. God is longing for our faithfulness. God wants to grant us justice.

But as we look at these stories of persistence – humanity’s and God’s – we have to ask: who is waiting on whom? We may feel like the persistent widow, seeking justice that has not yet arrived. But what if we are, in fact, the ones who have propped up the unjust judges? What if we have also broken covenant with God? Are we waiting on God to act? Or is God waiting on us? We know that God’s faithfulness will not fail. The question Jesus leaves us with is about our own. May we answer the call, with perseverance and hope! Hallelujah and Amen!