

Jeremiah 31: 33-34

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Luke 18: 1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "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 by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

From the Boredom to the Agony
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One of the great things, it doesn't seem great but it is, about commuting, is that sometimes I have to leave in the dark to get here. This morning was one of those situations. I'm not a morning person, and that's why it's a great thing, because people who are not morning persons miss lots of sunrises, and I get to see them because I have to leave early. There was no sun this morning, but somewhere about Berthoud I saw night turn into day and it was really glorious, even though it was raining, sort of snowing a little, it was an amazing thing. I thought about how, most of the time when my son's in the car, he's bored, or he says he is. "I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm bored." I keep saying, "Look out the window, there's this and there's this," and he's "Oh my gosh, I'm bored, just leave me alone." People who are bored like him miss great things like night turning into day, and so that's his loss, I guess.

It seems kids these days like my son, who's twelve, are more bored than ever. More bored than ever is what I read in an article about a year ago. This article was talking about the rise in the number of elementary-age kids who suffer from mild depression. The article said that some of that, not all of it but some of it, was related to sheer boredom. That surprised me a little. Does it surprise you? I mean, when I was a kid, we didn't have twenty-four hour TV, or twenty-plex movie theaters with a jillion different showings. We didn't have video games or Ipods or Gameboys or personal computers or DVD's. We didn't even have VCRs when I was a kid. I remember playing that primitive video game Pong, do you remember that? Can you imagine how bored my son would get with that? I tell him a lot I was clear into high school before we had Pacman or Atari for entertainment. Some of you out there, I know you have, have told stories about how you hiked four miles up a steep hill in three-foot snow drifts to get to school. Have you done

that? If you haven't done it, you've heard it, I bet. Maybe you've told a story about how you used to walk six miles to get groceries for your mom, and you hauled the heavy bags home, and then your dad made you chop firewood until sundown. Those are fun stories to tell kids, right? Well, to get the same reaction from your kids that some of you got from yours, parents of my generation say things like this, and I've said this – "We didn't have a VCR until I was in college." Or "We looked up the words in the book dictionary, not online." Or, "We only had one phone, and it was attached to the wall, and it had a rotary dial, and we had no phones anywhere near the car." Or, "The movie theater downtown had one screen, and it showed one movie, maybe a couple of times a day." Or, "We waited all year to see *The Wizard of Oz*, or *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* on TV, and you changed your whole schedule to make sure you didn't miss it, because it would be another whole year before you got to see it again."

Kids today marvel at how boring all that seemed. My son would say, "How bo—ring." And yet, research shows kids today seem more bored than ever. Have we overstuffed our lives and their lives, to the point of not being real or human any more? It seems this is not new, though, even though I would like to think it is. I saw a teaching textbook from the 1960s about teachers dealing with bored students. Evidently, they always have. One line from this book *When We Deal with Children* says, "Boredom will always remain the greatest enemy of school discipline." Research has shown that boredom is closely related to frustration, and that the effect of too much frustration is invariably irritability, withdrawal, rebellious opposition, or aggressive rejection of the whole show. This suggests, sadly, that on the whole continuum of emotions, it's not a huge leap to move from boredom to agony and rejection of life. So bored with what life has to offer that we choose poorly, we make the wrong choices, we take the wrong directions, we embrace parts of life that don't bring joy but rather bring pain. I think that maybe that's where the unjust judge is in today's parable. Maybe he's so bored with his routine, his day-in-and-day-out, that he's just going through the motions. The scripture says he doesn't care about anything, that he doesn't even fear God. It sounds like he's become robotic, it sounds like he might be rejecting the humanness that can bring joy and fulfillment.

Jason Raize is a lucky guy. Jason Raize became a Broadway star at age 21. He has this quote. Jason says, "I spent a lot of time when I was a kid dreaming of the time when I'd be able to get out and start performing, and it's been such a rollercoaster ride that anybody who feels they're kind of sitting in a life and they're not happy with it or they're not dreaming enough – basically, take a stand for yourself, and stick up for yourself, and get out there and enjoy it." Jason Raize was the original Simba in Broadway's *The Lion King*. He was a lucky guy, Broadway at 21. Jason Raize committed suicide in 2004, nearly seven years after the show's debut.

Jesus tells the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow, as a way to illustrate the need to pray without ceasing, he says, to pray and not lose heart. That's why Jesus says he's telling the story. But I think it's more than a parable about prayer, at least the way we've always thought of prayer. I think Jesus is imploring us to see ourselves as empty, robotic selves like that unjust judge, people in need of God's full and welcoming grace, if we but look up and ask, or look out and find. Jeremiah reminded the people in

exile that God was writing a new covenant on their hearts, not one that could be broken by human interference, but one that would always remain. Jesus knows this - God is always with us. God is always with us, even when God gets hidden in all of our stuff, and even when God gets lost in our boredom.

This brings me to the second character in today's parable, the persistent widow. Who is this widow, anyway? She represents not the boredom, but mostly the agony in this scripture. In this society the widow lived in, her society, she would have been someone without a means to provide for herself, someone without a public voice and really not much of a private one either, someone who was as dependant as you can possible be on society for her existence. In today's world, she would have been a battered woman alone on the streets, looking for a safehouse. She would have been a homeless person seeking shelter or food. She would have been an older adult who can no longer get out, and is forced to stay home alone, with very little contact with the outside world. She would have been a youth who is seeking a way to belong. She would have been a child, unable to be heard by mom, dad, teachers, coaches and all others around her who are scheduling her life away when all she really wants is some conversation and someone to show they really care. In essence, the widow in this parable represents the needs of our church and the needs of the community and the world we live in. This widow represents every part of the church that we're called to serve, and every part of the community and the world we're called to be in and among.

And that brings me to what I love most about this scripture. In verses 3 through 5 we read, "In that city there was a widow who kept coming and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.'" She kept coming, crying out in agony and despair, desperate to be heard. She creates a sense of agony with the bored and uncaring judge, I think. He gets tired of hearing her. Verses 4 and 5 read, "For a while the judge refused; but later he said to himself, '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 by continually coming.'" Her persistence was wearing him out, creating an agonizing sense of, "Just get away from me, lady." But she doesn't care. She's in agony, she might as well drag him in with her, right? This widow is like a little kid who won't let you move on without recognizing him.

When my son Jake, who's now twelve, was about four or so, he was so persistent, so insistent, that he be heard. He kept on pulling and pulling and pulling and pulling on my arm, and whining and whispering and sometimes just outright wailing. So we finally had to develop a system, Jake and I. "If you really, really need me to hear you right away, put your hand on my leg." This worked, mostly. But even then, even with the system, it seemed like that little hand was on my leg all the time. He was persistent, you see. He still is, just like the widow. She kept coming, and saying, "Grant me justice, hear me out." The widow like a persistent child, kept coming. So it is with the needs of our church, and beyond its walls. Those needs keep coming too. They do. They do not go away. Every day, more people are in the hospital, or care centers, or forced to stay home due to illness. This is persistent. I see it day in and day out. We need you to be with those folks, to care for them, to love them, to visit and call them, to be the body of Christ for

them. Every day the children and the youth and the college students in this congregation need you to be part of their Christian journey. The college students need adoptive parents and meals and support for building a stronger college ministry here in this congregation. The children and youth need Sunday School and adult mentors and snacks and chaperones, support for the Christian Ed. director, support for the Youth Pastor – well, you get the point, don't you? Their needs keep coming. They do. They're persistent. How can you offer your time and finances to strengthen these programs? How is God calling you to be with the children and youth and young adults of our church? Every day, the young parents in our congregation need to feel support and encouragement for their task of raising the next generation. All those bored people out there, they need to feel that the church cares for their needs, that the church is looking ahead, seeking ways to be fiscally responsible, and yet visionary in the ways we see the church their children will inherit. They keep coming. They are persistent. Their needs do not go away. What can you offer in time and talent to develop a vision for this church that embraces all ages?

In Fort Collins the homeless, the battered women, abused children, the working poor, they keep coming too. They are persistent. They do not go away. Our structure and our society sometimes works in ways that make it seem like we wish they would go away, but they don't. Like the widow, they are persistent. They keep demanding justice, their due, their say. How can you offer gifts and time to these ministries? To Habitat for Humanity, to the Larimer County Food Bank, to Crossroads Safehouse, to the Northern Colorado AIDS project, and many other organizations like this that make a difference in Fort Collins.

The unjust judge got tired of the pestering. He got tired of it. He gave in because of that. "Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." Think of what a stronger body of Christ we would be if we didn't address needs after they had pestered us until we were brought to our knees. If we quit agonizing over the decision to give money to this cause or that one, and just gave to all of them, because we clearly have enough to do that, if we all gave wholeheartedly. If we quit agonizing over whether to spend time with this ministry or that one, and just all gave what time we do have.

They say the average kid asks for something nine times, and then, guess what happens? The parents finally give in. I heard this from my son. All the kids know this, and they count. "I'm up to number seven." They know the statistic, they count it, they live it, and they know it works. God does not want us to give to one another simply because we gave in and got tired of hearing it. God wants us to give as Christ gave, before we're sick of the pestering, and because, and only because, of our love for one another. Bill Clinton has a new book called "Giving: How Each of Us Can Change the World." In the book he tells wonderful stories of regular people making a difference in their communities all across the country, in churches and schools and neighborhoods. Really good stories. There's also a link on the Clinton Foundation website where people can tell their own stories of giving. There's a link to the book and there's a link where you can share your own stories of giving, and there's thousands of other examples there as well that are not in the book.

If you were asked to share your story of giving, what story would you tell? Are you bored with your life, your routine, your church? Maybe some of us have been hanging out a little bit too much with the unjust judge, and we've lost interest in everything, and we care about nothing. Maybe we do need a little pestering, or need to listen to it. Jesus says, just before he tells this parable, that we should pray always and not lose heart. I think by prayer, he means that we should be the church, always, that our lives themselves and what we give of them, that's the real prayer. God will always be with us. Jeremiah reminds us of that. Knowing that, then, we should go forth with joy, and not agony, to be the church. Be the church through prayers of presence, prayers of gifts, and prayers of service. Thanks be to God.