

## **How long?**

Luke 18:1-8

October 20, 2013

Help me! Help me ...

Is saying, "Help me," a sign of weakness?

I suppose it depends on the situation. If your seventh-grade daughter is asking for help with her math homework and what she really means is that she wants you to do it for her, then, yes, saying, "Help me," is a cop-out. It's a sign of weakness. Or if you have to confront a friend about some hurtful behavior, but you say to your wife, "Help me," because you want her to make the phone call for you, then, yes, that shows a lack of courage. It is a sign of weakness.

But if you say, "Help me," because you recognize your limits, because you know you can't do it all alone, because you acknowledge your need for other people and their strength added to yours, then saying, "Help me," shows wisdom and maturity and humility. It is a sign, not of weakness, but of strength.

Saying, "Help me," does not mean you are helpless. Being helpless means literally being without help: having nothing to do, no resources to draw on, no one to turn to. But you say, "Help me," because you do have someone to turn to, because you do have resources to draw on. Saying, "Help me," is doing something!

And if you say, "Help me," to God, you are being faithful, not weak, powerful, not helpless. God helps those who help themselves? Hogwash! God helps those who ask for help! God delights in helping those who ask him for help.

We have been talking this fall about the distinctive marks of the followers of Jesus. How do you recognize a follower of Jesus? What are the signs, what are the distinctive traits of character and behavior, that mark the men and women who belong to Jesus, the women and men whose actions and attitudes are shaped not by heritage or the prevailing culture or enlightened self-interest, but by Jesus? How do you recognize the followers of Jesus?

Not by how they vote. Voting Republican is not a mark of the followers of Jesus. Voting Democrat is not a mark of the followers of Jesus. There are faithful followers of Jesus on both sides of the aisle.

Not by what church they attend. Being members of the United Church of Christ is not a telltale mark of the followers of Jesus. Neither is being Protestant or being Roman Catholic or being part of any particular church or denomination. There are faithful followers of Jesus in all kinds of different churches, and yet, being part of a church, being part of some gathered community of believers, learning there how to love each other and learning there how to love the world, that is a mark of the followers of Jesus.

You cannot even recognize the followers of Jesus by what they believe. Yes, they believe in Jesus. Yes, they put their trust in his promise to save and to guide and to be present always, but I mean that particular beliefs -- beliefs about the authority and infallibility of the Bible, beliefs about the meaning of Jesus' death and how it saves us, beliefs about the meaning of the sacraments and how to practice them, beliefs about life after death or about heaven or about hell -- no such particular belief is an essential and necessary mark of the followers of Jesus. Faithful followers of Jesus have different ideas and opinions about all these things.

And not by their stand on the hot button social issues of the day. There are faithful followers of Jesus on both sides, or should I say, all sides, of the debates about abortion and gay marriage and the death penalty and the use of military intervention.

So how do you recognize the followers of Jesus? According to Luke's gospel, these are the marks ...

Wanting one thing. Followers of Jesus are single-minded, focused in desire. They want one thing. They don't follow Jesus ... among other things. They follow Jesus before everything else, above everything else.

Followers of Jesus are marked by generosity of spirit: welcoming, loving, including all kinds of people in their wide embrace, especially those who never expected to be included. especially those who never expected to be loved. Followers of Jesus are not the ones drawing lines in the sand, not the ones passing judgment, not the ones separating the sheep from the goats. They are the ones taking risks by loving the ones everybody else considers unlovable.

Followers of Jesus may have stuff -- money and things -- but stuff doesn't have them. They have stuff and they let stuff go. They use stuff. They use stuff to serve and to bless.

Followers of Jesus are not necessarily people of great faith. Some followers of Jesus have very little faith, only faith the size of a mustard seed, but it's enough, because followers of Jesus use whatever faith they have. They live by whatever faith they have.

And followers of Jesus are grateful. They acknowledge their debt, their unpayable debt, to God, and that sense of utter dependence on God's grace, that sense of being reconnected to the source of life, makes them well and fills them with joy, whatever their status, whatever their circumstances.

Today, Luke's gospel adds one more mark of the followers of Jesus. They ask God for help and never give up!

She didn't give up. The widow, the widow in Jesus' story, didn't give up. She is not a "real" person, of course. It is "just" a story, but Luke tells us that Jesus told the story, the parable, to make a point to his disciples. Jesus told his disciples -- his followers -- this story so they would pray, so that we would pray. When? All the time! Pray all the time and never give up!

She didn't give up. This widow kept on asking for help, kept on pleading for her rights. Women in general and widows in particular had few rights and little legal protection in the Palestine of Jesus' day. Women were not permitted to testify in court and by custom should not even allow themselves to be seen in that public arena, and widows were wholly dependent on the beneficence of others, usually relatives of her deceased husband, for survival. The widow in Jesus' story surely had few rights and little power, and she had an opponent, someone causing her harm, perhaps a relative who refused her support, or perhaps someone else taking advantage of her vulnerable situation, robbing her what little she did have.

She had few rights and little power, but she was not helpless. She had someone to go to for help. She went for help to the judge in her town, the town's corrupt judge, a judge who didn't care a whit about God and didn't care a whit about anybody. She went to him and asked him for help against her opponent, and he said, "No."

So she went back again and asked for help again, and he said, "No."

So she asked again, and he said, "No." She asked again, and he said, "No." So she asked one more time, and he said ... "No."

So she asked again. For the forty-seventh time she asked again for help, and the judge said, "Enough already! What do I have to do to get you to leave me alone? You win! I will rule in your favor! Just go away!"

How long?

How long did she keep asking?

How long will you keep asking? And she was asking a callously indifferent human being!. Think of who you are asking!

How long? How long will you keep asking? How long will you keep praying? How long will you keep crying out to God, day and night, for help? How long?

How long will you keep praying for God to save your lost child, the child who is doing everything but follow Jesus?

How long will you keep asking God for help in healing a broken relationship, a relationship broken through no fault of your own, but broken nevertheless in spite of all your efforts to reconcile?

How long will you keep asking God to open your eyes, to soften your heart, to curb your selfishness, to increase your generosity, to strengthen your will, to bolster your courage, to make you ... more like Jesus?

How long will you keep praying for our church, not just praying that we will survive, not just praying that we will have enough people to keep our doors open and enough money to pay our bills, but praying that we will be enthusiastic followers of Jesus, that this church will be a place where people can come to experience the healing power of the Spirit of God, that this church will be a place from which people will go to do Jesus' work, the hard work of justice and the hard work of compassion?

How long will you keep praying for our nation's leaders, praying for wisdom and for common sense, for genuine respect and for genuine humility and for genuine compassion?

How long will you keep on praying for this land still divided by race, still splintered by class, still neglectful of the orphan and the widow and the alien?

How long will you keep on praying for peace, not merely a lull in the war-making, but real peace, real reconciliation between enemies, real shalom, well-being and freedom and opportunity and access to resources, not just for some, not just for the rich and the powerful and the well-born and the well-educated and the well-connected, but for all?

How long will you keep on praying for God's kingdom to come?

How long?

Or will you give up? Will you say, "I already tried and I'm done trying. I already prayed and I'm done praying. I already asked and I'm done asking. It's too much for me. No help is coming. There is nothing more to do. It is what it is?" Will you give up?

Never give up! Followers of Jesus never give up!

(Sing *Bambelela*)