

Will he find faith?

Luke 18:1-8

April 27, 2008

While we have been listening to the parables of Jesus on Sunday mornings, a couple dozen folks from the church have been discussing the parables at our Wednesday night Bible study. We held our last session this last Wednesday. I had asked the class members to write their own parables and to share them with the rest of us.

And they did! They did a great job! Their stories were poignant and powerful and provocative, just as parables should be. I didn't think of it at the time, but I think I should collect their parables and publish them, so the rest of you can enjoy them and be challenged by them, too.

The first parable to be shared Wednesday night was Linda Waldon's. She told us the story of a bird. She didn't title the story herself, but the comments of other class members suggested several possible titles. Depending on whom you ask her story might be best titled:

- (1) *The persistent robin,*
- (2) *The all-too clean window, or*
- (3) *The dumb bird!*

It seems Linda is awakened each morning by a "thump" and then another "thump" ... the sound a robin's body makes when it smashes itself into a bedroom window! "Thump" ... not once, not twice, but 20-30 times. "Thump" ... each morning ... "thump" ... for two years ... "thump" ... the same robin ... "thump."

So what do you think? Dumb bird? Overzealous window washer? A very persistent and very special robin?

As I think about the story, as a parable, I like to think of that robin as a knight of faith ... a knight of faith. What courage! Hurling his frail body against that unbending window pane day after day after day. What tenacity! Not giving up, scorning the pain, shrugging off the muddled head and the aching bones and gathering himself to do it again! What faith! Thinking this time -- this time! -- maybe the window will be open, or maybe somehow, some way, this time -- this time! -- I will be able to pass through the window and reach the promised land on the other side!

Of course, all the rest of us sensible birds, us thoroughly rational creatures, think him silly, ignorant, ridiculous, a seriously misguided bird. We tell him:

Give it up! Get on with your life! There is nothing more than what you already have! There is nothing better than what you already are! This is just the way things are. Robins don't belong in bedrooms ... among people!

But the robin doesn't listen. And the next morning ... "thump ... thump." He will stay at it until he gets in, or until he dies trying, which in my mind is a whole lot better than dying not trying!

I think there is some of that robin in the widow of Jesus' parable. She is a persistent woman, or what some might call a dumb widow. Dumb, because she keeps on going back again and again to the same judge asking for justice, day after day to the same heartless judge who doesn't fear God (and so will feel no compulsion to do the right thing) and who doesn't respect people (and so has no motivation to do the compassionate thing).

Give it up, lady! He's not going to listen to you! Get on with your life! There is nothing more, nothing better, for you! Be happy with what you've already got, even if it's not very much. It's just the way things are.

But she doesn't listen. She will go back to that judge again and again until she gets what she wants or until she dies trying.

And she got what she wanted! She just plain wore him out and he awarded her her rights just to be rid of her. *Now will God not judge in favor of his own people*, Jesus said, *who cry to him day and night for help?*

It's an argument, of course, from the lesser to the greater. If you can expect to get justice from a hard-hearted judge who cares nothing for no one just be being persistent, how much more can you expect to get help from a God who listens and who cares. *God will judge in [your] favor and do it quickly ... so pray!* Ask God for what you need!

Of course, pray! But don't miss the tension that underlies Jesus' story. Jesus tells this parable to his followers *to teach them that they should always pray and never become discouraged*. But why does he need to teach them that? Presumably because some of them or all of them have become discouraged! Presumably because some of them or all of them have given up praying for help!

Like you have become discouraged? When you have prayed and prayed and had no answer? When you have prayed and prayed and nothing changes? When you have prayed and prayed and the forces of nature and time and human nature keep pushing and pulling and controlling your life as they always have?

How many times should you pray for something you desire? How many times should you pray for someone you love? How long should you keep praying, waiting for God to answer?

Is it silly? Is it unrealistic? Is it dumb? Shouldn't you just accept the fact that things are the way they are? That there is nothing better, that you can be nothing more?

We are told, after all, that acceptance is a good thing, a healthy thing, and that denial is unhealthy. The robin is misguided and self-destructive. For his own good, he should accept the fact that the window is an insurmountable obstacle and that he's not going to get in. The widow is unrealistic and masochistic. For her own good, she should accept the fact that a cruel and godless judge is not going to give her satisfaction.

And you, you man of faith, you woman who wants to believe? How long will you continue to deny the reality around you and wait for an answer that will never come?

Oh, but you have so much more going for you than both the robin and the widow! You have Jesus, not just your teacher, but your Lord! Not just one who tells you stories about the other side, but one who has been to the other side! One who has shown you the world as it can be! One who has shown you what you will be!

That's what faith is ... the ability to see. To see things, not just as they are, but as they can be, as they will be. To see a world, a new world, that is not just a dream, but a promise. Faith is seeing it and believing it and living for it. The opposite of faith is despair. The opposite of hope is resignation: to say, to think, to believe, that things are as they are, as they always will be.

Will he find faith when he comes? Will he find faith among us when he comes? Will he find faith ...in you?

Or will he find resignation? Informed, reasonable, prudent, healthy, not at all silly, resignation?

I don't expect God to answer my prayers ...

I don't expect God to heal my broken relationships ...

I know my parents will never respect me ...

I know I won't find a job that brings me joy as well as put food on the table ...

I know I've done more harm to other people and to myself than God can ever forgive ...

I know I can't change who I am ...

I know I can't change the world ...

I know the poor will always be with us ...

One person, one family, can't make a difference in the health of the earth ...

I don't expect God's kingdom to come in my lifetime and probably not in anybody's lifetime ...

There will always be wars ...

Palestinians and Israelis will never be able to live side by side in peace ...

Blacks and whites will never fully understand each other, never fully accept each other ...

The church will never be united ...

Things are just the way they are ...

Apartheid in South Africa will never be overthrown ...

Slaves in America will never be set free ...

Women in America will never get the vote ...

No good man will ever give up all he has, even his own life, for the sake of those who hate him ...

No good man, no matter how good he is, will ever get other men and women to give up all they have to follow him, and to give themselves up for each other ...

Death will claim every good man, as it will claim every one of us in its irresistible embrace, and no one, no one, will ever rise again to life ...

But excuse me, says the robin. He did!