

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
October 16, 2016.
Luke 18:1-8

My husband likes to say, "Jesus didn't say 'Pick *out* the cross that you like or prefer,' - no, he said - "Pick ***up*** your cross and follow me.'" Besides being amusing, this speaks volumes to the reality of the Christian life. As followers of Jesus we are not so concerned with trying to control the world, and what will happen to us, but rather with our willingness to work with our life as we find it - putting our energy and intention into ***our response*** to the ups and downs, the upsets and delights of life. As in last week's sermon where I referred to Victor Frankl's idea of our freedom lying in the space between a stimulus and our response, we always have the choice as to how we will respond to any given situation.

Consider this story:

There was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbours came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically. "May be," the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbours exclaimed. "May be," replied the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbours again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "May be," answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbours congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "May be," said the farmer.

Short term judgments rarely serve us. They are reactive. We need to hold out for the bigger view of life – that life inevitably contains difficult and enjoyable moments but that moments necessarily change. Can we be curious about the bigger story? God's story?

The idea that we all have our own cross to bear is a fascinating one. It means that each of us has our own life to live and we can't possibly know what the path or journey is for another person. Everyone's cross is different. Everyone's challenges are different. This may sound obvious but it needs to be said.

It doesn't serve to judge others because we don't know how God is calling to them to God's own self with their crosses. And for ourselves, we can't know the God's plan. Things that seem bad to us may be difficult, yes, but may serve in the long run. Things that seem good, that we cling to because we like them, can sour over time. And we have to let go of them in order to allow God bring the next thing into our life. Life is fluid and change is the one constant.

In today's reading from Luke, we're told about a town where an unjust judge, a person in a position of power, doesn't use his power to serve others, but to serve himself. A widow, who would have been one

of the most vulnerable people in ancient Israel, comes to the judge for help dealing with her opponent. Who was her opponent? We aren't told but I can imagine it being a person taking advantage of her relative helplessness. By returning over and over to the judge and pleading for his help, the widow wears the judge down and he finally agrees to help her, just to get her to leave him alone and in peace.

Biblical interpreters often suggest that the unjust judge is God. And propose that God will grant you what you want if you simply nag God. This doesn't work for me because elsewhere in the gospels Jesus seems intent on convincing us that God is a gracious loving Divine Presence who enjoys lavishing abundance on Creation.

No, I think this passage works more effectively if we consider the unjust judge as Jesus' alluding to the Pharisees.... the religious leaders who used their power to serve their own goals, not the needs of the poor and vulnerable. So in this story we have the most powerful and the least powerful members of a society interacting.

Might not Jesus be saying, "On earth you're going to have to be persistent with the powers that be. There's not necessarily fairness in human personalities or structures. Persist and hopefully you will change their minds or their hearts and maybe even their policies. And pay attention because even what may seem like justice might be simply self-serving behaviour." As today's listeners, we're challenged to look beyond roles to the use of power and not get deceived by how things ought to be. We're to be aware, see how things really are, and to respond ourselves in ways we think are just.

In contrast to people who use power to their own advantage, we have a God who is gracious, giving and forgiving. One whose favour we do not need to seek. A God we do not have to nag. God knows what we need and want. Our part is to be open to receiving what God offers us.

So it's interesting that the beginning of this passage begins with the words, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their ***need to pray always and not to lose heart.***" As the opening sentence, this sets up the key idea that even though we have to deal day-to-day with the power structures of our time, if we stay connected to God through prayer, we will hold these interactions in the correct light. Our worth is not determined by others; or by how they treat us. Our worth is God-given in that God created us, delights in us and loves us unconditionally.

Humans are called to strive towards this kind of love. While life may not seem fair, it is life to have to deal with the challenges the best we know how. We won't be perfect in how respond but we will gain skill with practice. We won't be perfect, but we are called to do our best. And a life of prayer helps us remember that we can't possibly know what God is working *through us*. We just need to engage in the events of our lives, and do our best. Doing our best, staying connected with the Divine, we are promised "the peace that passes all understanding" which is a profoundly ***different*** kind of justice. It's a peace, a love that is offered generously to all who are open to receiving. Wow.

The passage today from Luke ends with "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find ***faith*** on earth?"

So today's reading *begins with prayer* and *ends with faith* and sandwiched in between is this story of justice. Our time here on earth is

our opportunity to hone our hearts - to practice speaking out for justice, to practice moving beyond our comfort zones, and challenging ourselves when we're fearful to step out in faith.

And consider this - if life was "fair" as we conceive of fairness, would we learn anything? Would the Son of Man find anything of value when He comes again? No, it is through the challenges of our lives that our faith either grows or collapses. Of course we all have moments of clarity and moments of doubt but the goal is to move towards the light - in faith, towards cooperation with God. So that the cross we carry can become lighter and more life-giving.

Life is challenging. I don't have to tell you that! Our choice is how we respond. Do we try new things, open up to people we're uncomfortable around, do we attempt to change behaviours that don't really serve us or other people? Faith is built up through experience, and through prayer.

Jesus didn't say - "Find a cross that makes you look good, that others will admire, that feels comfortable and that fits you well." No, Jesus tells us to trust that the cross we are given, even though we might not think so, is the perfect one for us. We just need to be willing to accept where we are, work with the reality of our life, and start, and continue, walking. Praying as we go. Praying because we are told that prayer is powerful. Prayer and action build up faith.

Can we trust that this is God's world, that God has a plan and as God's created ones, we are an integral part of God's creation? Can we step back from our preferences and judgments and say "may be"? We can't possibly know what God is doing. Because with God, anything and

everything is possible, however strange, uncomfortable or unpopular our journey may be.

As Christians we are so lucky, well, may be “blessed” is the right word. Because we are following someone who accepted his cross, lived a life full of purpose, had good friends, enjoyed good meals, challenged those who were more interested in comfort, looking good and what was easy, and who, in the very person he was, followed God to a very unpopular and unpleasant place, and saved the world.

Jesus is our model of justice. His justice *has* saved the world. We just don't fully believe or accept that yet, these two thousand years later. His message is so radical. Can we venture to say his life is the truth?

“May be.” Hopefully. Yes.

Amen.