

Sermon – Luke 18:1-8; Genesis 32:22-31

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“Hold On”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Well, good to see you, friends! It's been a while since I've stood in this pulpit, but I've enjoyed this little interlude. Not because I've enjoyed not preaching, but because I've been blessed to hear the Word proclaimed so well and faithfully by my partners in ministry. Three weeks ago, I sat with you and heard Pastor Kersten preach her final sermon here, at least until she comes out of retirement again, filled as always with wit and wisdom. Two weeks ago I, like you, delighted to hear Pastor Lauren instill in us once more the gift of faith in Jesus Christ. And then came last week. Oh, Pastor Dave, I see what you did there. Sure, your opening story fit the text and got you off to a fine homiletical beginning. But a story of visiting a barber shop? *Really?* Yes, Pastor, we see your glorious head of hair, a sign and symbol of the power and privilege of the hirsute among us, while those of us who are more, ahem, follicly challenged suffer under your unjust oppression! How long, O Lord, must I suffer such insult and injury? How long until justice flows and righteousness is restored? I need to call Brian Urlacher's people; then you'll see!
2. Yes, Lord, how long? How long until justice and righteousness are restored? Joking aside, it's the question that lingers in our minds and haunts our reality. The widow in today's parable stands in for the millions who suffer not simply oppression but the indifference of those in power, those like the

judge who neither fear God nor respect people. We think of people, children of God, like our African-American sisters and brothers who cry for justice but are too often simply ignored; who, when they take to the streets are told that theirs is a protest too unruly, that we'll listen on our terms when they just calm down a bit; who are then told, when some among them calmly and peacefully take a knee during the national anthem, not harming or inconveniencing anyone, that they are being disrespectful. Perhaps, but what more, these people might think, do you want from us? And people of God such as our sisters in Christ, who are told again and again in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that they are mere objects, that men can do what they want, and then talk about it how they want and dismiss it as locker room banter. How long, O Lord, until there is justice for these and for all people? Are you listening, God? And no, this is not political; I have no interest in addressing the question of for whom you should vote. It is a simple matter of reminding ourselves that today's parable is not abstract; it is about real people whose pleas too often simply go unheard.

3. Jesus today juxtaposes an unjust judge with God. The unjust judge only acquiesces because of the constant annoyance of the woman; why doesn't she just submit her petition and wait? Doesn't she know that the judge has more important things to do, like caring for himself? Yes, he finally gives in and hears her, but not out of love or concern. Even his granting of justice seeks to demean the widow, reducing her to a nag, to a child screaming for a candy bar in the checkout line. And this, Jesus reminds us, is precisely not who God is or how God acts. God, Jesus tells us, is listening day and night and will not long delay. God is not only listening, God has entered the arena and joined the struggle. God is the One who joins Jacob in his fear by the banks of the Jabbok, who allows Jacob to cling to God, who shows Jacob the divine face, and who, finally, grants blessing. God is the One who is passionately on the side of the widows of this world and all who stand marginalized, oppressed, or simply ignored. God is not a God who needs to be nagged, but

who delights in listening to us, to hearing our cares and our cries, and who is slowly bending the moral arc of this universe towards justice, that is, to the righteousness of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

4. Jesus reminds us today that while we do not always know, cannot know, why it all seems to be taking so long, God is not indifferent. God is listening. Our prayers, in ways more mysterious than we can comprehend, have an effect upon the divine heart of the Creator of heaven and earth. God is listening. The problem lifted up by the parable is not so much whether or not God is listening; the problem is, why aren't we? In the face of this world's sin and brokenness, why aren't we listening? Why must we tell one another to wait in line, to come back when it's convenient for us? Dr. King, in his "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail," wrote: "I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

5. So, what are we to do? I would humbly suggest that we begin by naming as sin the unjust judge that lives in each of us – in you and in me; that we lay this sin at the foot of Jesus' cross and then repent, turn around, and live in new ways. Because really, hard as it is, it's simple enough. The unjust judge fails to care, and failing to care, declines to listen. What if, when injustice or oppression is named, we listen? In listening to our fellow children of God, we claim together the dignity and worth that we all share despite our shared brokenness. In listening, we just might find a way forward – not, finally, because we are capable in ourselves of bending the moral arc of the universe, but because God is already doing exactly that. So we keep lifting our prayers to the God who listens, the same God who is telling us to open our hearts to the hurts of those around us. Even, I might add, to the bald in our midst.

6. Jesus tells us today that God will not long delay in helping those in need. Maybe, your heart cries, then why is it taking so long? Or is it? Jesus, remember, speaks these words knowing the direction in which the arc of his life is moving – to the cross. In the cross, the fullness of the justice and the righteousness of God are revealed. In the cross, Jesus stands in place of everyone who has yearned for a new world to dawn while the world said, “Wait.” In the cross, we see Jesus’ persistence for the good of all people on full display, this Jesus who *will not wait*, giving away his divine life so that forgiveness and righteousness may rush in; so that we may repent of our sin and find newness of life; so that the Kingdom of God can break into this world, life conquering death, overturning the ways of unjust judges and opening our hearts and our ears to God and to neighbor.

7. So hold on, friends. And no, I don’t mean wait; I don’t mean hold on a minute. I mean hold on to God as Jacob did, clinging in hope even though the night seems long. Hold on to hope, as the widow does. Hold on to Jesus, who puts himself in your hands once more this day in bread and wine. And holding on to Jesus, hold on to each other. Jesus is here. Hold on to him. He has not delayed, already in his death and resurrection giving to us all that we truly need. And holding on, let go. Let go of our need to judge, to delay, to focus on ourselves. Let go of that stuff. It’s all dead in the tomb anyway. Let it go. And hold on to Christ who is holding on to you. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.