

“Just Right Here”

Genesis 32:22-31; II Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Part six of the sermon series,

“Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program”

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24, October 16, 2022, dedicated to G. Dene Barnard on his 90th Birthday and Jackie Dean and Susan Brooks on their birthdays and always to the glory of God!

“Just Right Here”

Genesis 32:22-31; II Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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When Father Greg Boyle reaches out to his “homies” at Homeboy Industries, to check and see how they are doing, they will often answer, “*Aqui no mas,*” – poorly translated from Spanish is – “Just right here.” They will say, “Just right here, washing my face.” Or – “just right here, staring at my son.” Or – “Just right here, drawing Winnie the Pooh for my daughter.” Or – “just right here, watching Jerry Springer” (Fr. Gregory Boyle, Barking to the Choir, p. 73).

“*Aqui no mas,*” – I am “just right here,” living in the now – living in this present moment.

Fr. Greg continues, *“Jesus would insist that we are saved in the present moment, just right here. So, we choose to practice dwelling in the present moment. We need to find ways to establish ourselves here and now. The Buddha teaches that life is only available in the here and now. Jesus didn’t teach much differently. We hold out for happiness, healing, transformation, always awaiting a few more conditions that need to be met. This is one of the reasons happiness eludes us. We still think it is around the corner”* (ibid, pp.73-74).

Think about this. It seems so simple. If your anchor is not centered in today, then you will blink and miss the delight of this very moment, which is always with us and is the perfect teacher. Think about the lessons we learn when we live in the present moment. We aren’t furrowing our brow with a look of self-inflicted pain or launching into a diatribe about all that has gone wrong in the past, all the disappointments and the struggles. We aren’t dreaming about a future hope, or about something in our lives which will become actualized somewhere down the road. We are present. We are just right here.

On Friday, I experienced Paradise – all day long. I got up at 5:00am and drove to Solon, Ohio to be with three of my six grandchildren. Susan and I usually take this trip together but she stayed home to be with our dogs because of their recent surgeries and recoveries. Driving north at 6:00am, I was able to watch the sunrise over Ohio. It was magnificent. We live in an absolutely beautiful state. I arrived early and found my oldest son, washing dishes. I gave him a big hug and told him I loved him and he told me he loved me too! Then I went into the Living Room and began what would become six hours of bliss with my grandsons. We had a blast being right there – they in their pajamas until their dad came home and made us go outside. Then, as my internal battery was wearing down a bit, my 2 ½ year old granddaughter arrived home from pre-school, threw herself into my

arms at full speed and directed me for the next three hours on what she wanted to do – blowing leaves with a leaf blower three times her size, swinging on the swing, playing dinosaur (she was T-Rex and I was the little dinosaur), sliding down the slide, playing dolls, playing hide and seek. When I tried to hold her baby doll (Who needed hugs) Emryn told me, “No, Pop Pop, you’re too big. Wait.” She ran out of the room and returned with a mother doll to hold the baby doll. “Momma will hold her.” My son and I watched the Guardians beat the Yankees in extra innings. We were all jumping up and down celebrating – trying not to land on the baby dolls.

We all sat down and had a wonderful dinner. After dinner, I got in my car and drove home talking with my mother and sister on the road as I watched the sun set over beautiful Ohio. I arrived home to tell Susan all about it.

“Aqui no mas” – just right here – one day lived in Paradise.

In the writings we know as The Apocrypha, the prophet Baruch tells us, “God will show all the earth God’s splendor. But will you be aware enough to even notice? Rise in splendor.”

Richard Rohr once wrote, “We don’t think ourselves into a new way of living. We live ourselves into a new way of thinking.” If we live fully into the moment in which we are given – we soak it in. We embrace it. We are alive in it. We are alive. We live ourselves into a new way of thinking. That is a healthy thing to do.

In today’s Gospel lesson, we meet a persistent widow and an unjust judge in what is often called the Parable of the Unjust Judge. I prefer to call it – **The Parable of the Persistent Widow!**

Jesus is teaching about a new way of thinking and acting. Jesus is teaching a lesson about prayer, about justice and right relationships.

He says, “Pray and never lose heart.” As the story opens, we don’t know what the widow needs – although it is not hard to guess. As a widow, scripture tells us she is treated as an outcast. Under the law in Jesus’ time, she cannot inherit her deceased husband’s estate. It goes straight to her sons or her brother-in-law. She lives at the mercy of her close and extended family’s men. And something is wrong in those relationships. Her identity has been taken away. She has no ID. She has no legal rights. She stands alone.

The widow goes to a powerful judge who the story tells us is not a respectable judge. By his own admission, he does not fear God. And he does not respect any person. Maybe he thinks being Godless and heartless makes him a better judge – more impartial, or something like that. Whatever the case, God does not get to him. People do not get to him. But this widow gets to him. Even though he *“never gives her the time of day,”* she gets to him because she throws a mean right punch. That is what the passage tells us. In the Greek, the judge uses a boxing term to describe the widow – *“She gives me a black eye.”*

The widow “bothers” the judge. She gives him a black eye (although there is no evidence that this physical. It may just be metaphorical). His self-interest for responding to her is not equity or justice, but conceit. He does not want to walk around town with a black eye and make up stories about how he got it. So, the judge grants justice to save HIS face – literally.

Isn’t this the way justice is often granted? It is too often granted by judges, elected or appointed leaders and others with power,

money, and the law on their side who **feel bothered by “the outcast” people** – like the widow.

Just right here, just right now, we have too many “outcasts” in Columbus. They are children who are cast out of schools and end up on the streets. They are young adults who are cast out onto the streets and end up in prisons. And once they are cast out of prison they end up living in “no man’s land.” They can’t get good jobs, or affordable places to live and thus, to take control of their lives they become real victims of a community that doesn’t value them.

Our outcasts are too often poor – immigrants, refugees, widows, Black people, Brown people, LGBTQIA people, young people, women and children, all who have been forsaken and forgotten and all who are – like the widow in this story – left alone to be their own champions and advocates in this world. We need to stand with them so they are never alone.

In the face of this harsh reality – elected and appointed leaders too often speak as though **THEY** are persecuted and picked on when in fact, they are the ones who have the power and position to do the right thing – but choose not to act. Over time, in order to save their faces, and despite all their spitting and fuming and making up stories about the “outcasts,” they just might do the right thing and grant justice. We would like to believe they do it for all the right reasons. But, like the judge in the parable, they often do it because persistence breaks through injustice.

Now I know (and we all know) this doesn’t define everyone with power. But it does define those who yield their power abusively or simply neglect to do their jobs as “public servants” and “elected or appointed officials.”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way, *“justice delayed is justice denied.”* I think our widow stopped by Coretta Scott King’s house on her way to see the judge! Because when she shows up in his court, she won’t put up with justice being delayed OR denied any longer. He knew her voice and her face. And he was scared of her for all the wrong reasons.

But the passage doesn’t end where justice is granted.

Remember, I told you at the beginning, this was a parable about praying and never losing heart. At the end of the parable Jesus asks, *“But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?”* (Luke 18:8).

You get the feeling Jesus didn’t know many persistent widows, or at least not enough of them. Maybe Jesus never met the “persistent justice-seeking widows” known as Building Responsibility Equality and Dignity! That’s right – I just called BREAD – **Persistent Widows!** As BREAD, we are faith on earth. Maybe we should rename ourselves: “The Persistent Organization of Widows (POW).” And I encourage each of us here to become a “persistent widow” and join with BREAD house meetings this month. I have one tomorrow at noon on zoom. You are all invited to join me in the moment ☞– tomorrow.

Remember – Jesus is concerned about returning and NOT finding “persistent faith on earth.” I believe you and I can live into persistent faith by living justly – just right here, just right now. We can be the change we want to see – in our own lives and in our own community. By changing the inner attitudes of our minds, we can change the outer aspects of our lives. We can do this – like the homies of Fr. Boyle in Los Angeles and the persistent widow in Jesus’ parable – by

remembering the present is eternal and the only eternity that counts is now.

Or in the words of Mary Oliver, “this is the first, wildest, and wisest thing I know – that the soul exists, and that it is built entirely out of our attentiveness.”

Pray and never lose heart – just right here. Amen.

