

Faith as big as an acacia seed. October 20, 2019. Amanda Bell

I'm grateful for the parables God has given us. I'm grateful because I love stories, and parables are stories that may at first seem simple, but when you look closely, you find layers of ideas to meditate on.

In this parable from Luke, we meet two characters— the judge and the widow. The judge plays the villain in this story. He decides not to award the widow her inheritance, what little money her husband left behind for her. He does this likely in exchange for some bit of money from her adversary. This is evil. Low. Take from the poor to feed the rich. It's very bad politics.

The widow, she's the protagonist, the good guy. She's the one who has faith, consistency, persistence, perseverance. She's all these things. Whole-hearted. And, what does she have to lose, anyway? She's already lost everything. This judge has taken the very last thing she had going for her. I read that widows during this time period were often still very young. They were some of the meekest people in the community.

And yet, the widow is faithful with her request. She is courageous, showing up in this person's life each and every day without fail, asking him to grant her justice. "grant me justice, grant me justice".

The judge knows his judgement in the case is not a moral one, but that's not why he finally gives in to the widow. He gives in to her because he is tired of dealing with her. He's annoyed. He wants her to stop bothering him. This inconvenience, this person he doesn't even know keeps showing up every day and interrupting whatever else he has going on. It's bad for business. So, the widow's behavior doesn't change the bad judge into a good judge. This torment simply isn't worth the little money offered him by her adversary. So he gives her what she wants so she will stop coming around.

The funny thing about this parable is that at first glance, it seems we're supposed to compare this judge to God. It says the parable's purpose is to teach the disciples to pray always to God, as the widow begged the judge. This judge who doesn't even fear God himself or care about people is to represent our loving God?

The consensus is that rather than comparing the judge to God directly, we must understand that if an evil-doer can eventually grant justice, think about how much more willing and just a loving God will be in response to our prayers? If a bad guy can be convinced to bring some good into the world, then the possibilities for prayer might just be endless.

Faith as big as a mustard seed has the power to move mountains, right? That's not a lot of faith. That's just the same amount of faith that it takes to plant a seed in the ground, water it, and expect it to grow. And it usually will. I don't know much about mustard seeds, but the other day at work, my friend Oliver and I were looking under logs for critters. It's very dry this time this year and we didn't have much luck. A few beetles, maybe. But there was something interesting in the ground that we did find. It was a seed that looked to be wrapped with a pick thread. When we looked closer, we discovered it was actually the beginning of a plant, a root system, sprouting from this seed that hadn't even been planted in the ground. Once we found one seed, we began to see many more all over the area, both with roots and without, and we put them in a tiny jar, got some of the other kids involved and had a pretty big collection of tiny black seeds after a short time. They were acacia seeds, which some of you may know that the Acacia is a non-native, invasive type of tree. And now, I understand why. This tree is persistent. It spreads seeds at an alarming rate, and they don't even have to be planted or watered to grow!

I think what Luke is saying here is that if we have faith, even the smallest amount of faith, and our prayers are in earnest, and persistent, if we are faithful in our intentions, then our God will find a way to grant our prayers.

I've thought of a lot of stories of persistence this week. You can probably think of times where persistence paid off. How many of you have ever been married? There's probably a persistent character or two in most of those stories.

There's the story about the guinea pig, where Justin, as a first grader, offered a gentle persistence in his plea for a pet, bringing home a library book each week about how to care for a guinea pig.

There's the story of Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old from Sweden who decided one day to demonstrate her opinion by walking out of her Friday classes to sit in front of her school with a sign that read "strike for climate". Now she's traveling the world leading huge protests and demonstrations made up of young people who are concerned about the way the world leaders are making decisions that affect the well-being of the planet. Of their future.

Rosie and I went down to Santa Cruz a few weeks ago to participate in one of these marches and what surprised me the most was how young these kids are that are out there holding signs that say stop taking away my future. It's a lot to hold as a child. They feel very strongly.

I watched an interview with Greta Thunberg, and the interviewer asked her what she felt was the one most important thing people could do to help the environment. She said "I think they should do everything". The one thing she suggested was everything. That's clever. She continued on to say that she was protesting so that lawmakers would consider climate change and the environment above all else because she believes it's important.

The widow was persistent because she believed it was important. The judge didn't care why it was important to her, but gave her what she asked for because she was persistent.

Greta Thunberg is now leading a movement among young people.
Justin has a guinea pig. Acacia trees grow forests in just a few years.

I'll conclude with one more story about persistence. Have you heard the story of the donkey and the well? There was a donkey that fell into a deep well. The farmer didn't care much for the donkey, so when he saw the donkey at the bottom of the well, hee-hawing for help, he gathered his neighbors and some shovels and they began to bury the donkey alive. He didn't think the donkey was worth saving. As the people began shoveling dirt into the well, the donkey continued to bawl for a certain amount of time, but eventually became quiet. After a time, the farmer looked into the well to see that the donkey had been moving out of the way of the dirt, stepping on the ever increasing mound, and as the dirt continued to build in the well, the donkey was moving slowly and persistently up the well. Once the farmers saw what was happening, the mission changed from burying the donkey alive to lifting the donkey out of the well. Once the old stubborn donkey was able to step out of the well, the farmers put down their shovels and applauded him with a newfound admiration.