This morning we are in the last week of our fall worship series, where we have been looking at the parables of Christ through the ears of His original Jewish listeners. And what I hope we have learned from this series is that our method of studying the parables is a lot different than what it was in was in the first century. We Americans in the 21st century like to have the right answer. We want the correct interpretation of the Scriptures yearning to know exactly what everything means. Many of us have grown up listening to these beloved parables, and we’ve usually heard the same things preached over and over, causing us to think we know everything about them.

This over familiarity of the parables is actually why we themed this series around the television show FRIENDS. When the other pastors and I were thinking through the parables, we kept referring to them as “The One With the Pearl or the One With the Seed” which is the same way each episode of FRIENDS is titled… “The One With the Roommate” or “The One Where No Ones Ready”. But parables are not meant to be domesticated…they were never intended to be mastered or fully understood. When we give them one simple meaning, they become boring and less powerful.

Jesus originally taught through parables to challenge, disturb, and provoke his first century Jewish audience. And he intentionally left most of the parables open ended to give the opportunity for His listeners to engage in conversation and discussion with one another. To ask each other how the parable was transforming them. Author Amy Jill Levine reminds us that, “in Judaism, study, interpretation of Torah, community discussion of God’s word is itself a form of worship. So, if we look at Jesus as a first century Jew, or if we were to read this text like Jews, reading that text and seeking it’s multiple meanings… seeking how it works on us, how it inspires us or frustrates us or forces us to ask new questions….that is itself a form of worship. And if at the end we’re left with more questions with answers, wrestling with our faith and theology…that is also an act of divine worship.”

But even though parables are meant to be studied, discussed, and debated with a myriad of meanings, the temptation is always to give a simplified meaning to them. And that is ironically what our Gospel writer, Luke does. At the very beginning of chapter 18, Luke the Evangelist explains what the parable is about before he even writes Christ’s words. Almost all biblical scholars agree that chapter 18 verses 2-5 is the core of the parable and that those four verses originated with Jesus himself, but we see the influence of Luke the evangelist all over verse 1. The Gospel writer feeds us a simple meaning…telling us that this particular parable is about praying always and never losing heart. And this is a beautiful interpretation and correct sentiment…we should absolutely pray and not loose heart. But there’s so much more going on in this passage that’s easily overlooked if we settle for the easy, surface level answer.

Jesus begins this parable with a description of a judge who lacks qualities one would desire to have in the courtroom. This particular judge does not fear God nor respect people. Now, many passages in the Old Testament including 2 Chronicles 19:9 emphasize that the most important characteristic of a good judge is one that fears God because their reverence for God would ensure they judge fairly. But the unfortunate truth was that criminal justice system tended to favor the wealthy and powerful in ancient antiquity. Author Amy Jill Levine tells us that judges at this time in history could have bought their position of power and that they would often accept bribes. People in the courtroom were also known for bringing in friends to advocate them so courts were not necessarily places of justice per say, but more so places where you could get what you wanted if you had enough money to do so. So, obviously some kind of injustice has occurred because we immediately see a widow petitioning this judge over and over, saying, "Give me justice in this case against my adversary.”

And several interesting things about this widow’s interaction with the judge. The first thing to note is that the Greek word for justice is can also be translated to vengeance…so we ask ourselves as the listener, is this woman demanding justice or vengeance, or a little bit of both? In an iconic episode of FRIENDS where they all travel to Vegas, Ross and Rachel have a little bit too much to drink and they decide to get married. Waking up the next day, realizing the mistake they’ve made, they agree to go to the judge for an annulment but Ross (who’s secretly still in love with Rachel) doesn’t want to get the wedding annulled so he lies to Rachel and says he went ahead and got the annulment finalize out without her help. Rachel of course finds out they’re still married and comes to Ross furious because she doesn’t know he’s still in love with her and thinks he’s just being a jerk. So, the two of them go to a judge to apply for an annulment and Rachel wants to get revenge on Ross for lying to her so she makes up all kinds of funny reasons for why their marriage didn’t work out…to keep this sermon kid-friendly, you’ll just have to go back and watch that episode in season six. And in the middle of Ross and Rachel’s bickering in the courtroom the judge gets frustrated and decides to not give them the annulment. Rachel’s plan to embarrass Ross and get revenge is spoiled and they both realize they’ll have to apply for a divorce. Some times when we are so focused on vengeance we loose sight of what’s really important.

But the widow in this parable is laser focused on what she wants and we see that the judge finally grants her petition, not because he has a change of heart and believes it’s the right thing to do…but because this widow won’t stop bothering him. And the Greek word for bother is actually a boxing term, so most commentators agree that this judge was probably terrified this widow is going to punch him and give him a black eye if he doesn’t do what she wants him to do. Not the kind of biblical picture you’d see on a Sunday school felt board, right? This depiction of a fearless, persistent, confident widow is not the one that’s always painted in the 21st century American church. Most biblical stereotypes of widows are that they are helpless, needy, and exploited. And while we don’t know what her need was or if she herself had been exploited…she definitely wasn’t helpless. She was a woman who made a plan, took action, and advocated for her cause until she got the justice she came for.

It’s so interesting to me that Luke sees this parable as the power of persistent prayer and faith, because we don’t see this widow’s prayer and faith play out in a passive way at all. She is modeling for us what it looks like to take action and fight for justice in our communities. When I allowed this parable to work on me this week and seep into my soul, I was convicted by the fact that our actions are our prayers way more than our words. The things that we pray on Sunday morning have much less meaning to them than the actions we make between Sundays. Our lives are a prayer to God in the way we live them….and every day we are invited to live with righteousness and boldness as we advocate for justice in this world. All of us have grieved injustice. All of us have felt the weight of living in a world filled with broken systems and imperfect leaders.

When I was meditating on this parable all week, I thought about all the innocent people sitting in prison convicted for a crime they never committed. I thought about their family members and loved ones, advocating with the same tenacity our widow exhibited in our parable today. Mothers who never give up hope that their sons will come home….wives who will stop at nothing until they see justice for their husbands. I thought about non-profits like the Innocence Project, who work to bring reform to the systems responsible for their unjust imprisonment.

I also asked some of our young people what justice issues matter to them. And they spoke of the staggering number of missing and murdered indigenous women in Montana and the lack of justice these cases often see. They spoke of the missing women’s family members and how their grief hasn’t silenced them…but instead lit a fire inside them. And how their loved ones continue to hold art exhibits, prayer vigils, community marches and courthouse rallies in an attempt to urge politicians and law enforcement agents to provide quicker responses and better resources to these cases.

Where do you see injustice today? What issue do you petition to the courtroom, demanding to see changed? We all have something that breaks our hearts and lights a fire inside our soul and propels us into action.

Our parable this morning ends with Jesus asking, “And won’t God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will He be slow to help them? I tell you, he will give them justice quickly.” Despite Christ assuring us that there will come a day when all things will be set right and justice will come into fruition, I still feel weary. I still mourn all the places in our world that are filled with violence, oppression, and systematic corruption….and I say that as a person of privilege. I can’t imagine how the black, indigenous people of color must be feeling in our communities. But this parable has worked on me. It’s left me feeling convicted, disturbed yet in the end… empowered and filled with hope.

Luke’s text concludes with Jesus asking the question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” And despite my exhaustion my answer is a resounding yes. Because no matter how dark the world may be…I see God’s light continuing to break in. I see the resistance winning and God’s revolution advancing. This parable showed me that there’s all kinds of different ways to pray. We can pray with our feet, when we advocate for any cause we deem just. We can pray with our vote when we participate in democracy and stand for our convictions in this upcoming election. We can pray with our calendars and our wallets…giving our time and our finances to organizations and causes we believe in. And we can celebrate that our faith is so much more than a few prayers we say or doctrines we recite. It’s everything that we do…everything that we are. May we continue to fight the good fight this week and as we stand for justice, may we never lose heart. Amen.