

## The Gospel and Justice Pastor Denise Douglas

Scripture passage: Luke 18: 1-8

Recently I was invited to read a book entitled **The Very Good Gospel**. The subtitle is: *How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right*. What a hope filled statement, yes? How Everything Wrong can be made right. The author Lisa Harper paints a beautiful picture of Shalom in the Garden of Eden.

John painted the essence of that as well two weeks ago in his sermon, Iconic. Lisa, as she explores the biblical vision of shalom asks the question: *What does the reign of God look like?* Out of Genesis 1 & 2, she states that shalom is a vision of a Kingdom that provides for all. A vision of abundance, of God's presence wiping away fear, of just and healthy interdependent relationships. A vision of respect for the image of God in every person, and the supreme God present and active in the muck with humanity. A vision of a genuine love relationship between God and humanity and that is interconnected with all other relationships in creation.



Our teaching team has called this *The Good Life*. Everything the way it should be.

The current series points us not only back to the Shalom of the Garden, to the life we were created for, and where it fell apart and was broken, but points us forward to the gospel, the Good News that God in the flesh—Jesus—was born, lived, died and was resurrected to open wide once again, the door to Shalom. Deep within the human spirit is the knowledge of and the longing for Shalom; for things to be right where they are now wrong. There is, I believe, a deep innate longing to experience The Good Life. Not the way the world defines it—riches, success, and power—but peace, right relationship, and justice.

Jesus told a parable of a woman seeking justice. She needed help for the things wrong in her world to be made right. Bob Allenbrand, a member of our Justice Team, is going to come and read this parable from Luke 18: 1-8, The Message version:

*Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. He said, "There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!'*

*"He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.'"*

*Then the Master said, “Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won’t step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won’t he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?”*

There are **4 characters** in Jesus’ story –**The woman, her opponent, the unjust judge, and God.** Luke tells us right up front why Jesus tells this story. He wants people to *pray consistently, to entreat God earnestly* for their need for justice, and to *never stop, never give up.* Let’s explore the characters Jesus uses.

### The Woman:

Jesus chooses the most vulnerable, the most helpless image in His culture, that of a widow. Widows were easy prey for the unscrupulous. A woman had little worth in that culture and what worth she was seen to have come only through her husband and sons. If she had neither, she was in trouble. Throughout the Bible we see some of God’s sternest words for those who take advantage of or ignore the vulnerable. This widow in Jesus’ parable desires the good life. She knows in her gut that what she is experiencing is not right. Jesus paints her as persistent, as one who does not give up pursuing justice.

Why does Jesus tell this story? So that people would *pray, entreat God for justice* and *never give up.*

### The Opponent:

Who is this opponent, enemy, adversary, violator? We know only that one exists—one whose action is causing an injustice. *There is a temptation for the comfortable in any society to blame the vulnerable for their own situation.* There are many versions of, “Well, I’m this, this and this, I am an immigrant, I grew up poor, I am this, that, or the other, *and I made it.*”—implying that those who find themselves vulnerable and helpless must somehow be the ones at fault. Not the story Jesus is telling.

There is an opponent, there is an injustice being done to this woman. And the point of the parable? Keep on praying and don’t give up. In Jesus’ story we have to assume she is praying, but we see clearly that she is acting. Jesus paints her not as quiet but as actively seeking justice.

I’m going to make an embarrassing confession to you. My life is pretty insular. I live in a comfortable home; I have a good job doing meaningful work and have for decades. I have parents who were present and financially supportive my whole life. I am white and educated. I have a kind, God fearing husband, sons who went to college, now working and living independently. I have a good life—it’s not perfect, but I am safe, and my needs are met.

*The embarrassing confession is not that I have a good life—it is that sometimes I don’t like the reminder that not all people do.* It’s uncomfortable; often today, in this city, in this world, it is exhausting and gut wrenching. We are reminded constantly that things are not as they should be, that people are suffering in numerous ways, sometimes from a clear

injustice, sometimes from hidden and insidious injustice. I gather I'm not the only who, at times, would prefer to stay in an insulated bubble.

Our preaching staff sometimes hears comments such as, "Didn't we just talk about justice?" "Do we have to keep talking about race?" In times past, I've even heard comments such as "Please don't show me another hungry kid from an impoverished nation." With a God who relentlessly draws attention to the care of the vulnerable and injustice, why, as Christ followers, do we turn away? Some of us feel an ambiguous guilt. Or we feel overwhelmed not knowing how to solve the actual problem, therefore we prefer to turn away.

Monday, as I began to prepare for *Justice Sunday*, I found it hard to stay insular, hard to stay in my "ivory tower" with people living in a difficult situation at the very gate of the church. It felt like the elephant in the room. By Monday morning, our housed neighbors had "had enough" and began emailing and calling us to see what we were doing about it.

I had just finished answering one of those emails when I saw Robin Wheeler pull up outside to work on our planters. That was a welcome distraction, so I popped out to thank her—maybe you will too—for beautifying our entry way. As Robin and I chatted, she brought up the elephant in the room. My distraction wasn't working! I voiced something to the effect that "Yeah, it sure gets complicated, overwhelming, and sometimes even we pastors are unsure how to proceed."

Robin then told me a fascinating story of how God had led her and her husband to be specifically involved in the life of a houseless person when New Hope was still in the old building. They learned a lot, the story has a great ending, and that person who they brought into their home is now thriving in another state. This is not me recommending that you do that—I know others who have done similar things and it was a disaster.

Here is what I want us to hear: Robin looked at me and said, "I have an answer for you about not knowing what to do." Sometimes, when someone says that, you start backing up a little bit. But, due to her story and her sincere, gentle demeanor, I was hungry to hear. I had already gotten the feeling that God had orchestrated this conversation. I thought it was a diversion. Turns out it was a pathway. With care and an easy confidence Robin said, "God will lead you to the ones you are to help; to the ones our church is to help. We cannot help everyone." She left committing to pray that God would reveal what He wants from us in each situation. No guilt, no heavy load, but the invitation to a front row seat watching God do His God thing when we pray, listen, and obey.

Our fears and reluctance to engage the world as it is, not as we wish it were, may be tied to our embrace of the "Shrunken Gospel." We doubt—at least I am guilty of this—that the gospel is big enough, sufficient enough, to make a difference here and now. Jesus says pray and never give up.

### **The Unjust Judge:**

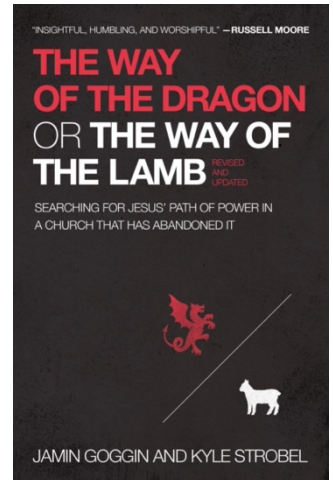
Next in the story, enters The Unjust Judge. The description undermines all confidence that this guy is going to give any kind of a fair judgment for one so vulnerable and persistent.

He is a worst-case scenario. He doesn't fear God, doesn't give a rip about people, is grumpy, and very self-absorbed. Sound like a judge you would want in a dispute? No way. But the widow, who knows her rights, longs for things to be made right. He just wants her to shut up and go away. But she knows that she needs this guy's authority, his cultural power, to set things straight. So, she comes back— again, and again, and again. Finally, he renders a just judgement. Not because he is worried about God, or his heart has softened toward her, but just to make life easier on himself.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that many of us have cultural power. It is waning. Middle Class, white, American church folks will not have the cultural power we have today in another decade. But while we have it, we are responsible for what we do with it.

I haven't read this book yet—I've listened to a podcast from the authors—but John has introduced it to our staff, and has mentioned it from the pulpit, too, if I remember right. The book is called **The Way of the Dragon or The Way of the Lamb**.

The Way of the Lamb seeks to lay down power and privilege, following the way of Jesus. The Way of the Dragon clings to power, fights cunningly or violently if needed to hang on to that power.



Philippians 2 gives us insight:

*Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.*

*You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.*

*Though he was God,  
he did not think of equality with God  
as something to cling to.  
Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;  
he took the humble position of a slave  
and was born as a human being.  
When he appeared in human form,  
he humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal's death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3-8)*

Authors Groggin and Strobel question if the church today isn't leaning more toward the Dragon of toxic power, rather than the way of Lamb which defines God's power evident through human weakness. Whether we look away from injustice due to how it makes us feel, or we deny that we are culpable, which may be true, injustice still exists—and God does not turn away.

John shared a helpful illustration that he had read in Isabel Wilkerson's book, **Caste**, with me one day. She compared the injustices of this culture, many of which we have inherited, to inheriting a house, built and cared for previously by someone else.

When we move into a home we may discover dry rot, faulty siding, drafty windows, strangely-wired lighting. (I may or may not be speaking from recent experience.) Who among us would ignore the problems simply because we didn't cause them?

Would we live with faulty wiring, pointing accusing fingers back at the previous owners? We could debate and psychoanalyze the social and family dynamics that allowed dry rot to occur in the first place, but that seems ludicrous if we are talking about the house we now live in. Those are not good or wise options.

David French, an American political commentator, talks about the difference between *guilt* and *responsibility*. We shouldn't feel guilty about having to fix something that breaks in our home that was part of the original design, or of a previous repair that didn't go well, or even the natural process of aging. It is not our fault. *But it is our responsibility if we leave it in a state of disrepair.*

We have inherited a world that makes life difficult and painful for vulnerable people. It would make sense that since we, our children, and grandchildren now live in this "home", we need to work to repair and to restore it no matter who the opponent of shalom has been. Two weeks ago, John reminded us from the creation story that Adam and Eve were given the role of care takers of this world. This was not connected to any guilt, but connected to being made in God's image.

Jesus' purpose with this parable? To encourage his listeners to pray and not give up. Now he brings it home—He saves the best for last.

### God:

God is the final character. Using the literary tool of compare and contrast, Jesus looks at the corrupt judge in the story and says, as corrupt as this man is, he still rendered a right judgment. God is clear at the other end of the spectrum— from *not fearing God* to actually being God, from *doesn't care anything about humanity*, to the Creator of humanity, who is all good, who cares deeply for the vulnerable, who planted within us the desire for Shalom. If that rotten scoundrel makes a right decision, you can be absolutely certain that God will render justice for His people. Those suffering injustice are to pray & not give up.

When Jesus walked the earth, Rome had its knee on the neck of Israel. Jesus said to them through this parable – pray, and never give up. God will come through.

This summer in our series, *What Does that Mean*, I spoke on the phrase *God is slow to anger*. The same Hebrew word, translated into Greek is also in this passage. God is sometimes painfully slow to bring justice due to His long-suffering nature, patiently waiting on the unrighteous, the unjust, to turn from those ways. But those who suffer at their hands can rest assured, God will make things right in the exact right time that only God can orchestrate. Our job is to work with God on behalf of those who suffer, to pray, to persist, to never give up, and keep the faith.

Jesus wraps up this story up with a rather unclear statement – the Message Version makes it seem more clear than original language does, but Eugene Petersen is not wrong with the closing question. The essence of this question is accurate: *“But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?”*

This is a parable about prayer, persistence, injustice, and the faith that God will, in His timing, return us to shalom. I want to pull us back to Robin’s reassurance. When we feel weary or overwhelmed seeing and hearing about injustice, I invite us to the freedom of her words and to trust that if we are willing to listen to God’s Spirit guiding us, we will make the difference we are meant to make for the vulnerable.

Benediction:

Thank you, church for entrusting Emily and me to lead a wonderful [Justice Team](#) with hearts for pursuing shalom as part of the work we do at New Hope. Our team has worked hard to introduce you to partners. Please take time to acquaint yourself with the displays and more importantly the people connected to those displays. We will keep you posted about deeper paths of service and connection with these organizations. Let me close with a prayer Jess Anders shared last Monday night at the close of our [on-line prayer time](#).

**The Praises of God Most High**

St. Francis of Assisi

You are the Holy Lord God who alone does wonders;

You are strong, you are great, you are most high.

You are powerful, you, Holy Father, King of heaven and earth,

You are three and one, the Lord God of gods.

You are the good, the whole good, the highest good.

Lord God, living and true.

You are Charity; you are Wisdom, you are Humility;

You are Patience, you are Security;

You are Repose, you are Joy and Gladness;

You are Justice and Temperance.

You are overflowing Richness;

You are Beauty, you are Meekness;

You are the Protector, the Guardian, the Defender,

You are the Strength, you are the Refuge;

You are the Hope, you are the Faith; you are the Love.

You are our entire Delight.