19th Sunday after Pentecost – October 19, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 18:1-8 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Have you ever felt like you wanted to just give up? Have you ever felt like you were right at the end of your rope, worn out from worry, worn down by the demands, or the frustrations, or the disappointments in your life? I have no doubt that some of you are feeling that way right now, today. Many of you are discouraged and disheartened by what is happening to our country, and to our planet. You fear for the future, and for the troubling legacy we seem determined to leave our children and grandchildren. But you are also dealing with crises closer to home. Some of you are facing health issues, your own or those of loved ones. Some of you are mourning the loss of friends, or family, or spouses. For some the losses are fresh and the pain is still sharp. For others the wounds are older but still continue to ache. My grandmother lived four months past her 100th birthday. And while that sounds like a mile stone we would all be happy to reach, she was ready to go at 88, when my grandfather died, because she did not want to live without him and didn't understand why God wouldn't take her too. Not that she wasn't happy to meet her 18 great grandchildren and get to know them. And not that she was constantly gloomy or depressed. But she definitely had her share of days when she was thoroughly discouraged and felt like she no longer had anything to live for, and that maybe even God had forgotten about her.

Jesus' disciples are facing their own discouragement in today's Gospel reading. The text doesn't tell us why they are discouraged, only that Jesus is encouraging them. "Don't give up," he tells them, "Keep praying and don't lose heart." As I said, we don't know why they have lost heart, but we can maybe guess. Maybe the reality of what Jesus' was planning to do was finally beginning to sink in. He had told them, nine chapters ago, that he intended to go to Jerusalem, where he would be put to death. He told them that not once, but twice. And here they are, still heading for Jerusalem nine chapters later. So, he must really mean it. But Jesus' impending death is only part of the problem. Perhaps more important, more disappointing, is that Jesus had not turned out to be who they thought he was, who they had hoped he was. They'd be more than happy to be on the road to Jerusalem with him if he was going there as a conquering hero, if he was going there to kick the Romans out and depose the leaders of their own people who were collaborating with their occupiers. That's what they had always thought the Messiah would do, come to make Israel great again. But going to Jerusalem just to die? What could possibly be the point?

So here they are losing heart, and Jesus' response is to tell them a parable. You can imagine the scene, can't you? Jesus noticing their discouragement, and then calling them together: "Gather 'round. Let me tell you a story." It's story about a corrupt and callous judge faced down by a desperate and persistent widow. She wants justice. Somebody has wronged her. We don't get to know the details. But we can imagine, can't we? The Bible itself gives examples of creditors taking away children and sell them into slavery to satisfy a debt. Right here in Luke, Jesus will rail against the establishment that "devours widows' houses." Or maybe she is being driven out of her home by her late husband's family? Maybe she's a foreigner, with no family of her own nearby to help. And maybe you can think of some people in our time and place in similar circumstances? People who have worked hard and long for low wages, doing jobs no one else wants to do, paying their taxes, active and vital members local communities, who now are having their families and communities torn apart under the guise of legality and order by people

who resent their very existence. And maybe you can think of flagrantly corrupt judges who have no fear of God or regard for people, except maybe those with very deep pockets?

So it's not such a far-fetched story that Jesus is telling, is it? At least the set up isn't. But then comes the unlikely twist: in this story the widow prevails! She gets justice, and she gets it by her persistence, because she will not give up. Jesus is using a common rabbinical argument, here, also used in classical rhetoric, arguing from the lesser to the greater. In other words, if even this widow could get justice from a corrupt judge by wearing him out with her persistence, then of course God, who is not corrupt but cares for you, will get you what you need.

Sadly, it will take time for this message to sink in with the disciples, and it will get worse before it gets better. Their road ahead will not prove to be as heroic as the widow's story, at least not in the short term. Jesus will go to Jerusalem. He will be betrayed by one of them, his closest followers, and denied by another. The rest will run away and hide in fear after he is arrested. We get it, don't we? The temptation is overpowering to give up in the face of injustice, especially when it doesn't yet directly touch us. It's easy to give up hope, even to lose faith that God is willing or able to address our present crises. And we can so quickly fall into despair, to retreat into circles of commiseration with like-minded folks, indulging in revenge fantasies and schadenfreude, or wearing out our social fabric on the battlegrounds of social media.

But here's *our* unlikely twist. God is not willing to leave us in our death spiral. Though we give up on God, God does not give up on us. God hears our cries for justice, for reparations, even for revenge. In Jesus Christ, God comes among us as one of us, in the flesh, to interrupt our hell-bent trajectory, to take our mutual assaults upon himself, and to be worn out by our destructive and vindictive versions of justice, so that we don't justice ourselves into oblivion. And then in the mystery and grace of God Jesus gets rewoven into new life on the third day, having wrestled sin, death, and evil themselves into their own death spiral, for us and for our salvation.

And when this news of God's persistent love is heard and finally sinks in, little by little, in fits and starts, something new happens. Scattered disciples are lured out of hiding and gathered back into community by living word and broken bread. Across the ages, by that same gospel, the Holy Spirit reaches out to create faith in us. In Holy Baptism the worn-out garment of our former life is cast off, and we are swaddled in resurrection life. As Paul writes in Galatians, in our baptism we "put on Christ" like a new garment. And having put on Christ, we now get to wear him out, out into the world. (You see what I did there!) We wear Christ out in the world. His compassion becomes our compassion, his mercy becomes our mercy, his persistent love becomes our persistent love. Our trust in the gospel promises gives us a confident hope that God is indeed still at work in the world, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. And so we do not give up hope, even in the face of great evil, trusting that God is even now ushering that evil out of existence, together with the sin and death that linger close by. They have had their day and they are doomed.

And so we do not lose heart, because the one we wear out will never again wear out, and will never give up, on us or on the world God loves. We do not lose heart and we persist in prayer and in sharing the resurrection life that is now ours. And as we persist, as we pray, and as we share the hope that is now within us, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.