

Well, it is a big morning for me. This is my first sermon in front of a congregation...like ANY congregation...so thank you for being my test subjects. Before I get too far into things I want to let you know that I'll be in the coffee area after the service ready to receive your feedback and constructive criticism. And don't worry, I promise not to cry...too much. In all seriousness though, I am looking forward to and truly appreciate your guidance as I grow my pastoral skill set.

Most of you know that I'm in my second year of studies at Wartburg Theological Seminary. What you may not know is that when I started last year they still required that first year students take New Testament Greek prior to beginning seminary. We could do this online or in person on campus. There is something that you need to know about me, I am not what anyone would consider to be a natural linguist. Over the years, beginning in high school, I've tried to learn several different languages...French, German, French...again, Spanish, and Lakota. With this, and other factors in mind, I decided to move to campus for the 5 weeks prior to beginning seminary last year to take New Testament Greek in person...where I could ask A LOT of QUESTIONS. And yet, it is still almost completely Greek to me. But there is one word that really stuck with me from the moment it was introduced. ΠΙΣΤΙΣ or ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ. The root word ΠΙΣΤΙΣ strictly translated is a noun that means *faith*, and throughout the New Testament it is used to mean *faith, belief, trust, confidence, fidelity, and faithfulness*. The verb form of this word is ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ meaning *to believe or entrust* and is used throughout the New Testament to mean *I believe, have faith in, trust in, or I am entrusted with*. When my professor introduced πιστις he said to always think **trust**. And this brings me to our readings for this morning.

Now, before I go any further I want to read to you part of the alternate Old Testament text for today. It comes from the book of Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31-34.

A New Covenant

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,^[a] says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: **I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.** ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," **for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,** says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

As I read this scripture there were two sections that really stuck out to me, **“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”** and, **“for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,** says the Lord”. It fit so well with the rest of the Lectionary readings in my mind that I found myself unable to write my sermon without it. With this in mind we can now get back to that favorite Greek word of mine, πιστις.

Πιστις, or trust, is the tie that binds our primary readings together today. As I revisited its’ definition, the one word that made me pause was fidelity. When I think of fidelity I think of faithfulness to my partner, but I wanted a more complete understanding of this word. When I looked it up this is what I found:

fi·del·i·ty

a noun meaning

1. faithfulness to a person, cause, or belief, demonstrated by continuing loyalty and support.
"he sought only the strictest fidelity to justice"

Similar to: loyalty, allegiance, obedience, constancy, fealty, homage

I went back to our readings. In 2 Timothy we find the author encouraging early Christians to trust in what they have learned and be persistent in proclaiming the Gospel message, regardless of how difficult it is, especially as there will be a time when people will not want to “put up with sound doctrine”. In Genesis we find Jacob being persistent in pursuing a blessing. In Psalms we find the author showing complete trust in the Lord to meet their needs. In Luke we find the widow being persistent in her request for justice and Jesus telling us to trust that God will grant justice to those who cry out to God day and night. Maybe you’re thinking, ok, so what do we do with this? And where does the reading from Jeremiah fit in? Well...I did leave out one important piece from our Gospel reading. At the very end of the reading from Luke, just after telling his disciples that God will grant justice to those who cry out to God day and night, Jesus asks, “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” For me this is the crux of our readings this morning. In fact, it is what I found myself going back to all week.

Growing up I heard this text taught from a perspective that really bothers me. One that says, if a person is a true Christian and truly cries out to God persistently then God will grant them justice and meet their needs. And if there are people living without justice it can only mean one of two things. Option one: they are good Christian people living in a part of the world where people actively seek to persecute Christians. Or option two: they really aren’t Christians, or at least aren’t Christians who faithfully call out to and rely on God.

Over the last decade or so I have often heard this text taught in a way that focuses on God granting justice to those who cry out day and night, but kind of glossing over that last question that Jesus poses, “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

So here I am this week, trying to write the first sermon that I would give to people outside of my classmates and professors and I found myself stuck on the issues of who God grants justices to, why some people get justice, but so many more, especially those on the edges and who are already oppressed, most often do not get justice, and how this question of whether the Son of Man will find faith on earth all fit together. And that is when the voice of my homiletics professor, seemed to whisper in my ear and say, “Sarah, when you’re struggling with one of the lectionary texts, go back and read the other texts for the week, they are all there, together for a reason.” And that’s what I did.

One of the most meaningful things for me that’s been emphasized in seminary is that the Holy Spirit works through created means. Basically that God works through all that God has created, including us. For those of you who were in Sunday School last week I will apologize now, because I’m going to share my Otter story again. Last spring, on one of my hardest grief filled days I went into work at the YMCA After School Program at Stoner Prairie Elementary School in Fitchburg. My emotional pain was so much that I was beginning to doubt myself and whether I should continue with seminary. When the kids started trickling in one 2nd grade boy checked in and was hanging up his backpack when he stopped and started digging something out of it. Finally he came up with a somewhat crinkled piece of paper. It’s something that the teachers at the school give out to students when they’ve done something good or need a pick me up. And here is it. It’s a photo-copied picture of an otter with the words, “You otter know you’re amazing!” This little boy walked over to me, handed me this piece of paper, and with his little hand on my shoulder he said, “Ms. Sarah, you otter know you’re amazing.” There was no way for this boy to know how I was feeling that day, but God did. And I had been crying out, over and over. And God answered me with all of the love I needed in that moment, through the kindness of one of God’s creations.

Here is what I would like to propose. God has made God’s self known to each of us. We have been equipped for every good work. As Christians we have been called to proclaim the Gospel message in our daily lives, regardless of our vocation, and I would suggest in both word and deed. We’ve been told that this won’t always be an easy task, but that we must persist, just as the widow and Jacob. God has made a covenant with God’s people, with us, that God’s law will be written on our hearts and that we will know God, “from the least of [us] to the greatest.” Knowing that Holy Spirit works in our lives and in our world through

created means I would like to put forward that in the first half of vs 8 of our Gospel reading when Jesus says, “God will quickly grant justice to them” that this will be done through each and every one of us; and that we must trust that when God puts one or more of our siblings plights for justice on our hearts that this is God telling us to trust God by acting. Because when the Son of Man comes again to judge the living and the dead he will be looking for that faith, that trust, that fidelity.