

Sermons at St Paul's

The 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

October 16, 2016

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

This a time when many people resonate with the story of the poor widow in Luke's gospel. Her persistent ask, ask, asking is the cry of refugees who just keep moving onward, asking where to find a safe place for their families. It is the cry of our black and brown sisters and brothers, as they ask for justice from a justice system that may not be just. It is the persistence of poor parents who enter their children's names year after year in the next charter school lottery, asking yet again for a good education for their kids. The list of those asking for justice from the presumptuous, systemic injustices of our world goes on and on. And to the best of our ability, we try to respond in the name of Jesus, helping out where we can, and praying where our hands won't reach.

If that were the point of this parable, it would be enough. But there is more, and we need to pay attention to the rest. It sends our thoughts in a somewhat different direction, because it teaches us about faith in God and the power of prayer, as well as our need to cry out for justice.

At the very beginning of Chapter 18, Luke introduces this parable as part of Jesus' instruction to his disciples to "pray always and not to lose heart." Then after we hear the story about the persistent widow, Luke adds the admonition of Jesus that God will hear and grant justice to his chosen ones who cry out to God day and night.

Now here comes a typical Jesus twist to the story! Jesus then asks: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

You see, Jesus can see that God has answered prayers again and again, so that there is every reason for people to have deep faith and trust in God. But Jesus is not sure he will find that bedrock faith here on earth, is he? He looks in vain for those with a deep conviction of belief and trust, who pray to God and who proclaim their faith.

The faith of Jacob, who wrestled with God's angel, results in his being renamed "Israel." Our Psalm today sings of the way God helps and protects those who love and trust God. And Timothy's Epistle emphasizes the importance of faithfulness and prayer: *"I solemnly urge you,"* he writes: *Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching."*

So here's the next question: Why on earth would those who created our Lectionary put a series of readings like this right in the middle of the classic annual giving season? What do prayer, persistence, trust and faith in God have to do with justice for a poor widow?

What if the answer lies more with the judge than with the widow? She's doing the asking, which is her responsibility. She's being persistent, and she has faith that justice will prevail. It's the judge who has to give the justice and the judgement. He has to go public in his decision to proclaim justice.

That's what we have to do, too. We have to go public, and we have to serve justice. We have responsibility to be both the persistent asker (in faith-filled and trusting prayer) and the doer of justice with all our resources.

If we serve on Boards or in positions of responsibility, we have that miserable judge as our baseline. *"For a while he refused,"* says Luke, but later he said to himself, *'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because the widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'* Yes. That's the baseline. Have even the tiniest fear of God and the least bit of respect for your fellow humans, and you are going to do the justice thing faster, sooner, better than this miserable judge.

One of the ways we serve justice is by doing what Jesus told us to do again and again in the gospels: we share what we have, with generosity and love. And we don't just share what we don't need – we share what someone else does need. So we give them our hours and our skills as directed by Timothy's letter: [to] proclaim the message [of forgiveness and love]; [to] be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; [and] convince, rebuke and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching [Jesus'

message.]” This is how we demonstrate our faith to Jesus. This is where he will find faith on the earth.

And we demonstrate our trust in God by sharing our money. Giving money away is going public; making a pledge is standing up to be counted among those who trust that God will give us enough to share. A church congregation at its best is like a protest movement for justice. A congregation on the move for justice is a powerful thing. We volunteer, we feed the hungry, we shelter the homeless and the refugees, and we worship our God of justice with love and respect. (And, because we are Episcopalians, we add beauty to that list of how we praise God!)

Linguists tell us the terms justice and righteousness are distinct in English, but in both biblical Hebrew and Greek, they only have one word group for these two English terms. So a righteous person in Jesus’ world was one who was just. No wonder then, for Jesus the worship of God and the care of one’s neighbor become the two cardinal points in living a life of justice, faith and trust. We hear these two injunctions throughout the gospels.

Remember the rich young man? Jesus first instructed him to follow these two commandments. He said that he had done so all his life. Then Jesus instructed him to practice radical generosity – “*Go sell all you have and give it to the poor. Then come, follow me.*”

We, like the rich young man, may feel we have too many responsibilities to others to sell all we have, and to give it away. The Bible adopts the tithe, or 10%, as its standard for generosity. Many of us practice what one Bishop called “the American tithe” – 5% to the church and 5% to charity. What matters, in the end, is to stand up and be counted where your heart leads you.

The miserable judge should not be our baseline as Christians – the two great commandments should. This is where we will meet Jesus – at the intersection of generosity and justice.

Amen.