

Pentecost 19 Proper 24 – Year C – Track 2 - 10-20-2019

I was raised by a very faith-filled mother. I grew up believing in the power of prayer. And my most fervent prayer, as a small child, was for a little brother or sister. I prayed for this very consistently. I knew nothing about biology or biological clocks, or how babies came to be. I simply prayed for a little brother or sister. I followed the instruction of Paul to Timothy we heard this morning: “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it...” I learned to pray from my mother. And then one day, my faith-filled mother – who had been 40 when I was born – broke the news to me that there would be no little brother or sister. It wasn’t possible, she said, without getting into any explanation. I don’t remember if I stopped praying for that baby then or not – but I think not. I was Persistent. When I was 9, my mother died. My father remarried – a woman 20 years younger than he – and they had three children together. And so, at the age of 12, I got my little brother – and then four years later another little brother – and then 14 months later, as I was starting my senior year of high school, my little sister Karin arrived.

In that senior year of high school, in religion class one day, we were talking about prayer and persistence, I think. And one of my best friends, whom I was graced to reconnect with at our 45th reunion last weekend, burst forth with this warning. “Be careful what you pray for, though. Stier [we always went by last names] prayed for a little brother when she was little, and to answer her prayer, God took her first mom, got her another mom, and then gave her *two* little brothers and a little sister, too!” At that point, several of my classmates moved their chair desks just a little farther away from mine!

This persistence in prayer seems to be what today’s Gospel parable is about. Luke even tells us straight out: “Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” That is, indeed, a worthy lesson. But it did not *grab* me. It did not challenge me beyond just “hanging in” or “hanging on.” What I feel, when I am looking at the Sunday Scriptures each week, is like what we hear described in the first reading. Jacob wrestles with God in that reading. He is “alone” - yet wrestles all night with one who puts his hip out of joint. That is, he is forever changed by this wrestling, so much so that he is given a new name – Israel. And Jacob/Israel will not let go, he *persists*, until he receives a blessing. That’s what, each week, I look for in the readings – wrestling with them until they, until God, gives a blessing – an insight, a challenge, that will change me.

And so, while the lesson to be steadfast, to be persistent in prayer, is certainly in this parable, and while with Timothy we need to be reminded to “be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable,” we need also to *wrestle* with the Word of God until we feel our hip go out of socket, until we receive the blessing.

So let us wrestle with this Gospel parable. On its face, we are presented with an unjust judge – “a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.” And he is confronted by a widow – someone without status or standing – who keeps “bothering” the judge. Our natural inclination is to see ourselves in the widow, who keeps pestering the judge for what she wants. And that makes the judge God, yes? The lesson seems to be that if we just keep “bothering” God with our pleas, we will eventually prevail. Hence my little girl self who kept praying for that little brother. Jesus then adds, “Listen to what the unjust judge says.” - The judge said, “I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” Then Jesus adds, “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?”

Yes, it is easy for us to identify with the widow, repeatedly asking for justice. But remember that Luke’s Gospel is all about flipping things upside down. Remember the Magnificat, God lifting up the lowly and sending the rich away empty. What if we flip this parable – or the side with which we usually identify? What if, instead of seeing ourselves as the widow, pleading with God, we recognize that *we* are the *unjust judge* – the one without regard for God or people – and what if God is the one pleading with *us* for justice?

We are surrounded by cries for justice – from the border, from the Kurds, from our Jewish brothers and sisters in Grand Rapids whose synagogue was desecrated, from the homeless in our own community who will only next week have shelter. What if we do not assume those cries are meant for a God in the heavens light years away, but hear them as God continuing to beg us to act with justice?

Two weeks ago, talking about mustard-seed sized faith, I said that if we did not believe in an Incarnational God, we could continue to look for God to act from outside. But our belief in Incarnation demands that we allow God to work from within - from within us.

It is indeed God's spirit within us that cries out when we see the horrific pictures of genocide happening before our eyes. It is the spark of God within us that tells us something is desperately wrong with the world. It is the Spirit of God praying within us, when we don't know how to pray ourselves, that dares to continue asking, "What can we do?"

We can keep bothering the unjust judges of our day, keep showing up, keep calling, keep writing, keep speaking words of mercy and peace and love instead of hatred and division and indifference. And we can keep wrestling with the question, "What can we do?" – until our joints are out of socket, until we are forever changed, so that we can be an agent of change in our worlds, large and small, not stopping the wrestling until we have indeed both received a blessing and *been* a blessing – an answer to prayer – for those crying out for justice.

Yes, let us be persistent, not only in our prayer, but in our wrestling.

Amen.

[Genesis 32:22-31](#)

[Psalms 121](#)

[2 Timothy 3:14-4:5](#)

[Luke 18:1-8](#)