

A Faith That Persists

sermon digest

October 17, 2010

Luke 18:1-8
carolyn dipboye

She is the plaintiff in the case. It isn't as if it's the first time we have encountered her. The widow, the orphan and the alien were the classic examples calling for justice and mercy. "Remember," Israel's Torah warned again and again, "you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore you shall do this." The maintenance of Israel's covenant community was predicated upon this sort of justice, and her judges took the bench for the exact purpose of hearing disputes between the people, particularly cases involving mistreatment of the weak and disadvantaged. And the widow was among the disadvantaged. She did not inherit property upon her husband's death. The property went to the husband's sons or brothers, and she was left to depend upon their fairness. Judges, therefore, heard many cases involving widows and orphans, widows and her in-laws; and a wise judge knew up front that God had promised to vindicate the widow's cause. Forgetful judges put not only their esteemed profession, but the well being of the entire nation in jeopardy.

And the early church agreed. Christian scriptures are replete with concern for the widow. According to James, pure religion is just this: "to care for orphans and widows" (1:27); and the widow in I Timothy becomes the example of continuing prayer. Acts goes into some detail about the early church's effort to set up a ministry attendant to the need of its widows (6:1-6); and Luke goes out of his way to make it clear that the widow occupied a prominent place in the ministry of Jesus—often sharing stories that we find in none of the other Gospels. The infant Jesus is blessed by the widow Anna; and in his very first sermon Jesus himself recalls Elijah's ministry to the widow of Sidon and then, according to Luke, moves on to repeat that occasion in his ministry to the widow of Nain. Jesus condemns those who "devour widow's houses" (20:47) and moves on to tell the story of a widow who puts two copper coins in the collection box at the Temple.

Luke alone gives us the parable of the widow who tirelessly and repeatedly comes before a judge seeking justice—a judge, who in his own words, has "no fear of God and no respect for anyone." Jesus, Luke tells us at the top of the story, shares the parable with his disciples to remind them of their need "to pray always and not lose heart." Conversing within himself, as often happens in Luke's parables, the judge finally gives into the woman's demand for justice "so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." Something important, however, is lost in the translation. Reading the passage more literally, we might just grasp a twinkle of humor in Jesus eyes: "I will grant her justice," the judge tells himself, "so that she may not wear me out with *continued blows under the eye*." "This pesky widow," the judge concludes, "is not only sapping my strength; she is giving me a black eye for all too see. Everyone is laughing and pointing, smirking at this pesky woman's ability to make me look like an insensitive clod, or worse, like a bumbling fool. I'll give her what she wants and get her off my back!"

Place Luke's story in context. Jesus, Luke says, is telling his disciples a parable so that they will not "lose heart". It was a story appropriate to Jesus' time. Even more, it may have been a story that took shape out of Jesus' own biography. Some believe that Joseph died during Jesus' childhood; and it is true that, unlike the rest of Jesus' family, we have no mention of Joseph beyond the point when Jesus is twelve years of age. Could it be that Jesus learned a special concern for widows not simply by being immersed as a boy in the instruction of the synagogue, but by observing the struggles of a single mother up against the hardship of providing for a family alone?

But go a little bit further. Think of the context of Luke's own faith community. A good two generations removed from Jesus' earthly ministry, the church wrestled with doubt and frustration. This Jesus, whom their forefathers and foremothers had expected to return soon to redeem his little band from their sufferings, still had not come. Decade after decade had passed, and here they were. Still under the thumb of Rome. Still wrestling with injustice and sickness and death. Some had just given up hope and thrown in the towel. Other were heartsick and questioning just how much longer they could hold onto hopes and promises that seemed always out in the future, never close at hand. So, "Jesus," Luke says, "told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." And fittingly, Jesus placed center stage in his story the figure of a lone, resolute widow—the person in scriptures who most represented tenacity of faith and the determination not to go dead inside but to hold on and keep praying and hoping, despite how badly and deeply she hurt.

If we are honest—and it is good for us in church to be honest, not false, not pretending things are what we know in reality they are not—if *we are honest*, we will admit to ourselves and one another that we are not

strangers to the struggle of the widow or of Luke's church. If we are honest, we will admit that our own experience of prayer and hope has something of a rough ride. It doesn't come easy. It's the point at which our deepest hopes and our greatest fears collide.

Perhaps like me, you believed the Sunday school lessons you heard as a child. Perhaps, like me, you tested on numerous occasions Jesus' words about prayer from a believing heart having the ability to remove mountains. Like me, you may have been disappointed when your prayers "failed". Our disappointment in childhood over the bicycle and pony that failed to materialize, however, didn't hold a candle to the disappointments of later life—the cancer that was not healed, the dementia that robbed us of a loved one, the friend upon friend who has passed from our midst. Losing heart to the point of not knowing how we should pray but understanding with everything within us that we must pray is an experience that we share to a person.

And so it is that on this day celebrated across our nation as World Hunger Sunday, I think back to the mid-1970's when world hunger made its indelible mark on the church's consciousness. Yet here we are four decades of praying later, and the immensity of the suffering still staggers the imagination. Globally, 925 million people are hungry. Every day, almost 16,000 children die from hunger-related causes. That's one child every five seconds. With 1.4 billion people in extreme poverty in 2005, the World Bank estimates that the spike in global food prices in 2008, followed by the global economic recession in 2009 and 2010 has pushed between 100-150 million people into poverty. Have our prayers mattered? Have our efforts to create a more just society made any difference?

Perhaps this is why the successful rescue of the miners in Chile this week was greeted worldwide with such enthusiasm. We have been up against a crushing sense of tragedy in our world—long standing instances of injustice that seem to have a life of their own no matter what we pray or do and unspeakable disasters, wiping out the lives and hopes of multitudes of people. It's enough to make us want to give up hope and praying and work and just cover our eyes.

"Jesus," Luke says, "told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Losing heart, becoming dead inside is a very real possibility. It steels us against the hurt. But it also walls us off from the God of hope and from becoming a part of God's reconciling, healing purposes for the world that groans around us.

"All we know in the life of prayer," Fred Craddock admits, "is asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting, trust sometimes fainting, sometimes growing angry." We can, he suggests, "only wonder at those who speak of prayer with the smiling facility of someone drawing answers from a hat." [Interpretation: Luke, 210]. Maybe, just maybe, it is our very struggle with prayer that opens our hearts to understanding about not just what prayer is but what faith is. More than a triumphalism about how we can maneuver God to do our bidding—getting God to change the traffic light we are approaching, as I heard one self-satisfied prayer warrior boast—maybe, just maybe prayer is about the innermost longings of our hearts. Maybe it is about an intense relationship that spans the years. Maybe it is about those things we don't understand and can't control. Maybe prayer is at bottom about our fundamental and all consuming urgent need of God.

Prayer, religion, and faith can, of course, mean so much less. It can be little more than the tip of the hat, just in case there is some validity to it. It can sift down to the mere grasping at respectability. Looking around us after all, we might just conclude that everyone else is doing it; why not us? The shabbiness of such a "faith," becomes obvious when we realize that as times change, we can just as easily look around us and conclude that since everyone else isn't doing it, we can let go. Such an adolescent going with the crowd hardly inspires confidence.

Observing that for most people in Jesus' day and in ours prayer is something on the order of brushing our teeth—once in the morning and once at night—sort of, you might say, a "spiritual hygiene"—Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that keeping prayers superficial turns out to be less painful than those cries that rise up from the depths of our souls; and not praying, not hoping may even be the least painful of all.

Don't ask and you won't be disappointed. Don't seek and you won't miss what you don't find. As for that growing deadness you feel where your heart used to be, well, you will just have to get used to that" [*Home by Another Way*, 202].

Contrast this cool safety with the deep passion of the elderly black minister who sought to interpret the parable of the persistent widow to a gathering churches on a matter of social justice: "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is" [In

Craddock, 210].

Faithfulness, according to Jesus, is about throwing ourselves into the struggle for the long haul. It is about hoping and praying to God with every fibre of our being. It is about lobbying for justice and not resigning ourselves in the face of human suffering. It is not about bragging rights or showy victories. It is about the dogged courage of day-in-and-day-out persistence against mountains of opposition that don't seem to budge. It is about "standing for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding," but knocking still.

The parable of the persistent widow ends with a startling question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

So how about it? Will he?