

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF GETHSEMANE

905 Fourth Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404

612.332.5407 • www.AMindToWork.org

Sermon for 20 October 2013

The Rev. Theo Park

If parables are stories that would seem to point to an obvious conclusion,
but which then jolt us by an unexpected ending,
then the parable we have just heard is particularly intriguing.

With whom are we supposed to identify in this parable?
The outraged widow is not presented as being particularly virtuous
or having just cause.
The judge is obviously neither impartial nor objective.
He doesn't even observe the basic commandments to love God and neighbor.
How can the kingdom of God be similar to anything
in this rather scandalous situation?

Like all parables, this story has more than one layer of meaning.
It was intended, the evangelist tells us, to remind the disciples
about the need for persistence in prayer and in their lives
as well as the need to keep the faith.

And so a common interpretation is to say
that as the unjust judge heard the widow because of her persistence,
and not because of the merits of her case,
so too will God hear us if we persist in our requests.

But there are a few difficulties with this interpretation.

Is it not a bit strange to identify God with the unjust judge,
that is, to equate God with someone who has no concern for justice?

Is it not strange to promote an understanding that petition is answered
because we have nagged God into action
without any concern for the content of the petition itself?

Is it not true that in the Hebrew Scripture,
and in the whole Bible in general,
God identifies frequently with the widow and the orphan?

Despite the context the author of Luke has given the parable,
I think that Jesus, the original story-teller, the master story-teller,
knows quite well what he is doing and saying,

and so I believe he would have us turn the parable upside-down and interpret it from a different angle.

Let's take another look at that judge.

What do we know about him?

We know that he is unscrupulous, without decency or conscience.

He doesn't respect people; there is no fear of God in him.

He is a closed universe.

This judge always has it figured out;

he leaves no room for the possibility that God may have

a more creative answer to the questions his life presses upon him.

Do we know anyone who matches this description?

Sure we do!

Every one of us fits that description sometimes,

and some of us may make a career out of doing so.

There are those times, all too often,

when each of us lives entirely unto ourselves.

We are dominated by our egos and generally looking for what is in it for us.

We are really stubborn in our self seeking.

We refuse to allow that God may have a creative solution

to problems that beset us,

that God may offer us better things than we can ask for or imagine.

Our decisions about life then leave no room for God,

and no room for other people

who have needs and wishes different from our own.

The universe, as we understand it, becomes very small; we are its sole inhabitants.

If then—as I am proposing here—the judge represents humanity,

who is that loud-mouthed woman with her persistent demands for justice?

Could it be that this poor and powerless woman,

who demonstrates unlimited chutzpah,

is there as a reminder of God?

God who continually calls us,

who continually asks for something from us,

who just won't let us alone until our resistance is broken down,

until, eventually, we yield and let God enter our lives

and guide us to do the right thing.

I much prefer this second interpretation

because I think it gives us a better picture of who God is and of what prayer is.

In this interpretation we see God as persistent

in trying to break down our defenses.
We see prayer as allowing this pursuing God to enter our lives
and challenge us to change our self destructive behavior.
The unjust judge is inside each of us,
and the purpose of our prayer is to wear him down,
to wear him out,
to force him to do justice.

Prayer is the widow's voice, strident yet sane, insisting that things be different.
God calling us all to further the cause of justice in this world.

Remember the words from the prophet Micah:
"The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

When we renew our Baptismal vows,
we promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving our neighbors as ourselves,
to strive for justice and peace among all people,
and to respect the dignity of every human being.

In what ways does God call us to strive for justice and peace this week?
It may be in our business practices,
Or in the way we treat the gift of God's creation,
or in the way we treat others,
especially those less fortunate than ourselves.

Whatever it is,
the widow woman was persistent in her demands for justice,
and so must we be.
And when we do that,
we behave in a God-like way.
We make ourselves available, and God uses us.

Brothers and sisters,
throughout our lives God continues to call us.
God's call is persistent,
and so long as we live it will continue.
We will never arrive at the place where we can say,
"There, now I've done it all. God will ask no more of me."
God's call may be different at different times in our lives,
but there is always more.
At times we listen well, at times perhaps not so well,
but God's voice is never stilled.

Each time we hear and respond,
we become more the person God calls us to be.

To pray continually and never lose heart then
is just to be in an attitude of openness.
It is having no predetermined demands to make on God
but to be continually ready, alert,
and listening to the demands that God may be making on us.

Scripture promises that God recognizes our needs even before we do.
It's not God who needs to change,
it is up to us to get in line with God's program,
and prayer is a large part of how that comes about.

Prayer is our declaration that we don't want to be a closed universe,
dependent only on ourselves and our own solutions.
Prayer is our desire to be open to God.

The story is told of a girl who watched a holy man praying at the riverbank.
Once the man had finished his prayer, the girl approached him and asked,
"Will you teach me to pray?"
The holy man studied the girl's face, and agreed to her request.
He took her into the river.
The holy man instructed her to lean over, so her face was close to the water.
The girl did as she was told.

Then the holy man pushed her whole head under the water.
Soon the girl struggled to free herself in order to breathe.
Once she got her breath back, she gasped, "What did you do that for?"
The holy man said, "I gave you your first lesson."
"What do you mean?" asked the astonished girl.
He answered, "When you long to pray as much as you long to breathe,
then I will be able to teach you how to pray."

May each of us long to pray, and learn to pray, and to persist in our prayer—
not so that we can change God, but so that God can change us,
and help us enjoy that fullness of life that God intends for us
as co-creators bringing justice to God's world.

Indebted to material written by The Revs. Barbara Beam, Thomas Keating, Gerry Pierse, and Charles Hoffacker.