

First Impressions 29th SUNDAY -C-

Exodus 17: 8-13 Psalm 121 2 Timothy 3: 14- 4:2 Luke 18: 1-18

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Some parables have allegorical elements; but parables are not allegories. For the most part the characters and objects in parables do not symbolize or represent other persons and things in our lives. If parables were allegories, they often would communicate a message contrary to the very core of the gospel. So, for example, what would happen if we allegorized today's parable about the judge? If we made the judge a figure for God---because we often refer to God as judge of the world---then, we would get an image of God as a hardened judge who will yield to us only if we "pray always without becoming weary." No, Jesus is not telling us an allegory and encouraging us to wear a reluctant God down by our persistent and annoying prayer.

The judge is unjust because he is not doing what judges are supposed to do--- grant justice for those who need it. In this case, he is not helping a widow get a just decision against her adversary. Widows at the time of Jesus were among the most vulnerable members of society. Without a husband to protect her rights a widow was easily victimized and cheated. If she did have any property and it were unjustly taken from her, she might have no one other than a judge to help her. But a widow might be overlooked, especially if her opponent and the judge were friends or would gain from cheating her. The judge in today's parable is unjust, so the widow has to attain justice on her own. She only wants what is her due, what is just. "Render a just decision for me against my adversary."

The widow has no powerful allies, no one to help her plead her cause. But she does have her determination, and she has her voice. She will use both to achieve her just goals. There is a bit of humor in the judge's relenting comment, "I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me." A powerful judge would not be afraid of the blows of a widow. Those who heard Jesus tell this parable wouldn't have missed that irony. The widow does get what she wants from the judge—not charity, not a favor or a handout---but justice. The judge names it, "I shall deliver a just decision...."

So, it is not only a parable about prayer is it? It is about people getting the justice they are due and it is about prayer that sustains a person in their quest for justice. It is also about Jesus' naming what disciples ought to be doing---- seeking justice for those in need and when it is hard to obtain, keeping praying so as not to lose heart in the struggle.

No, this is not an allegory, and God is not like the judge who needs to be worn down by us so we can get a just hearing. This is one of those "how-much-more parables." It starts with a human example, like the parent we heard about a few weeks ago who would give bread to a hungry child (Luke 11: 5-13), and the parable says, in effect: "That is just what any good parent would do so, *how much more* will God....." Today's example is similar. Jesus is saying: if an unjust judge would finally relent to constant pleading, *how much more* will God be inclined towards us; God who is so much better than an unjust judge. God will render justice for those who pray for it.

It seems that, for reasons known only to God, justice is slow in coming to many of the world's peoples. We work to make things right for those who are denied justice, and we pray for help in bringing about God's justice in the world. But we disciples can feel that, while God has received our call, we have been put on hold. So, we continue working at what we believe we are called to do—and wonder what is taking God so long to respond. Why doesn't God do what Jesus promised? "Will God be slow to answer them? I tell you; God will see to it that justice is done them speedily."

It is easy to lose heart as we struggle to deal with people in crisis who need help against the powerful and the unjust. The parable does show that Jesus is well aware of life's inequalities; that there are unjust judges and disenfranchised people in the world. While we work, wonder and wait for God's promised help, we struggle against discouragement and fatigue. We are heartened by our faith that tells us God is concerned about the world's little ones. We are invited by Jesus to trust that God will set things right—eventually. As Mary promised in her Cantic: the powerful will be unseated and the lowly raised to high places (Luke 1: 46-55).

Jesus' final question to his disciples is a sobering one. "But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Why wouldn't he find faith? Because there is a danger we could be worn down and discouraged trying to be his faithful

disciples; trying to do his work against what feels like insurmountable forces and odds. We would also be tempted to ask, “What difference do I make in this world with its enormous problems? Who will miss me if I pull out and just tend to my own immediate needs?”

So, Jesus tells us today’s parable. God doesn’t have to be pestered by our prayer to give us what we need. God is already inclined towards us. Our persistence in prayer is important because we need to stay in touch with our God. We need the Spirit Jesus says God wants to give us so that we can be empowered to continue working on behalf of those who need us and help them attain justice. Jesus alerted us to the role of the Spirit in a previous teaching on prayer when he said, “How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?” (Luke 11:13). We would ask, “How long, O God?” And Christ invites us to trust and keep working. But he also tells us “keep praying”—because if we don’t, we are liable to lose heart. “...pray always without becoming weary.”

Another prayerful response we can make to the parable is to ask the Lord to direct us towards those in our community and world who need us, especially the most vulnerable and those who suffer injustices. Since today’s parable stirs up images of courts of law we can ask: How do I and our congregation respond to our neighbors who lack good legal and social agencies? Who are the invisible and ignored groups in our society who need our voices to blend with theirs to procure their rights? The parable teaches us to persevere in prayer because we must persevere in doing God’s justice in an unjust world. And that will require long and constant prayer!

QUOTABLE

The society to which we belong seems to be dying or is already dead. I don’t mean to sound dramatic, but clearly the dark side is rising. Things could not have been more odd and frightening in the Middle Ages. But the tradition of artists will continue no matter what form the society takes. And this is **another reason to write**: people need us, to mirror for them and for each other without distortions-not to look around and say, “Look at yourselves, you idiots!,” but to say, “This is who we are.” [Could we substitute, “**another reason to preach**”?]

----Ann Lamott ,in *Bird by Bird*, p. 234

JUSTICE NOTES

“...pray always...”

(Luke 18:1)

Those who work in ministries of social justice, and those who, by word and example teach justice, must make prayer the ground of their work and ministries. Prayer opens our hearts to God’s compassion and places us at God’s disposal to be used for the coming of God’s Kingdom. Prayer in which we let go of our own agenda and simply surrender to God’s Spirit allows us to see the pain of the world with God’s eyes and be filled with the passion of God to better manifest God’s heart of love to all those with whom we work.

Below is a *Prayer for those who Teach Justice*, provided by our Diocesan Office of Peace and Justice. Since we are all called to teach justice by our lives, we invite you to cut it out and pray it regularly.

Prayer for Those who Teach Justice

We give thanks for your light and love, Gracious
God. You have given us a precious mission which
stirs our soul.

We are grateful for your Spirit moving through us,
helping us to form the words of justice, peace,
and love, helping us to proclaim your Good News.

We see the wonderful things you have done for
us, and we cherish the challenge of reaching out,
being your voice of hope to a world of sorrow.

Renew us this day and every day.

We quickly grow weary, easily falter, lose heart and dance with despair.

We need to open ourselves to your grace, to listen with longing for your call, to be
like the Magi,

following a sometimes-distant star.

Remind us *we are part of a community*, we are part of a people on pilgrimage, we

are never alone.

We are nourished at your table, and we nourish each other through sharing.

You have called us by name, and we are yours.

Amen.

----Jane Deren Education for Justice www.educationforjustice.org

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Here's a note from someone who started writing to one of the inmates listed on this page:

I wanted to share a story with you about what happened when I sent off some post cards to death row inmates a year ago. One of the men dropped me a note thanking me for writing, so I replied, and it was the beginning of a correspondence that has been a gift to both of us. Just this week, he was returned to general death row population after 9+ years on look-down and he attributes some of his positive changes to the support and encouragement that our written conversation has offered. Certainly, there are multiple pieces to the puzzle that is our life and every person and experience adds something to the finished picture. I feel very privileged to have been able to be a part of this man's journey towards healing. Whether or not there is acknowledgment of the message, it seems pretty obvious that sending postcards is something that needs to be continued. We become who we are in relationship to each other, and it is very difficult to discover the many positive aspects of ourselves in isolation. Continue to encourage people to reach out to these men, reminding them that they do have an inherently good self and reminding them that there is always the opportunity to become more of what God has intended for them.

---Mary Therese Lemanek Allen park, mi

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about

them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

- Terrance Campbell #0064125 (On death row since 3/28/02)
- Wesley Toby Smith #0765397 (5/29/02)
- Quintel Augustine #0612123 (10/23/02)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606