

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 16, 2022 – The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 18:1-8
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's passage from Luke's Gospel includes a brief parable known by several names – the Parable of the Unjust Judge, the Parable of the Importunate Widow, and the Parable of the Persistent Woman. The parable itself is straightforward. There are two characters – a powerful and ruthless judge and a widow who has suffered injustice. The Jewish people who heard this parable would have thought of the passages in the Hebrew Bible in which God commands the people to take care of widows and orphans – people who otherwise may have had no one to care for them, no one to speak up for them. This background would have underscored the judge's lack of mercy and his disregard for the will of God.

We need to be clear that the unjust judge in this parable should not be confused with God. The judge grants the widow justice out of annoyance, not out of a sense of justice or of compassion. The reasoning of the parable is that if a merciless judge will give way to the unrelenting pressure of the widow, how much more God will listen to the prayers of the faithful. God will listen to the cries of God's people because God is just and merciful, not because God is tired of being asked.

Jesus says about God: "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them." If we look honestly at the world today, or the world throughout history, or perhaps even our own lives, Jesus seems to be wrong here. God does not seem to "quickly grant justice" to those who have suffered injustice. Justice is often slow to come, if it comes at all, to nations and peoples and groups and individuals. The prayers of the faithful to God for justice frequently appear to go unanswered. How do we understand this?

First let me say that I don't think we can fully understand how God answers prayer. Nor can we understand the relationship between our sense of time and God's eternal nature. We sing these words in the great hymn 'O God our help in ages past': "A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone; short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun." The mystery of time and eternity. We may not be able to understand how God might view "quickly."

We wait for God's justice to be done, as we wait for Christ to come again and make all things new. But we are not to wait passively. We are meant to do justice. The famous passage from the Old Testament prophet Micah summarizes our responsibilities: "[God] 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?" (Micah 6:8). Doing justice ourselves is part of behaving as creatures made in the image of God, our Creator. God is just, so we also should be just. God is merciful, so we also should be merciful.

This means that we are to treat others fairly, to share what we have, and to work for justice in whatever ways we can. All of these will find expression differently in our individual circumstances. Where we are. Who we are. Life as it presents itself to us. This morning's lesson ends with Jesus asking, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" We are called to be faithful, living our lives according to God's will as best we can.

Our passage from Luke begins: “Jesus told the disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1). Part of our living faithfully as followers of Jesus is to pray always and not to lose heart. How do we do that? What does it mean to pray?

Most of us will probably think first of speaking to God in words. We may pray according to a set form from memory, as when we pray “The Lord’s Prayer.” We may pray using the Book of Psalms, 150 prayers of many kinds that have been at the heart of Jewish and Christian tradition for thousands of years. It can be helpful to pray in the words of others, both because they express well what we wish to express to God and because our minds and hearts may learn and grow through them. The prayers of others may lead us forward in our own soul’s growth.

We also speak to God in our own words, spontaneously. We might thank God all through the day for God’s blessings, as we are aware of them. Or perhaps at night we might think back over the day and give thanks to God for all that we are grateful for. We often use words when we ask God to forgive us for something we have done or said, for some lack of charity in our hearts, for whatever troubles us about how we are living and being. We often use words when we ask God to help us with our own needs or with the needs of others. We may use many words or simply place before God a name or a concern. We may use words to praise and love and adore God, or to offer ourselves and our lives to God.

And we may do much of this prayer without words. Realizing that God knows all our hearts and needs, our lives, everything with much greater knowledge than we have, we may confidently pray without words. We turn ourselves inwardly toward God. We lift ourselves to God, heart, mind, and soul. We rest in God’s presence, in God’s loving embrace.

Jesus said that his disciples need to “pray always.” We will have to expand our understanding of prayer to imagine how we might “pray always”. In The Book of Common Prayer’s Catechism, the answer to the question, “What is prayer?” is “Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.” This definition reminds us that we pray “by deeds,” in what we do, how we act. Christian tradition teaches that acts of service done for the love of God and for the sake of God’s world are the clearest ways in which we pray by deeds. In the New Testament Christians are instructed to offer hospitality, to bear one another’s burdens, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and to heal in Christ’s name. Love in action is prayer.

“Jesus told the disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” Jesus knew that his disciples might very well lose heart as they prayed. I imagine that most of us have lost heart at some point in our lives of prayer. We may feel that prayer is totally dry, one-sided, and useless. We may ask God to help us or someone we love, and God doesn’t seem to help. We may not feel God’s love or forgiveness, though we are desperate for both. The Eucharist may lose its meaning. The words of the Prayer Book may become stale and rote, and the Bible may not “speak” to us. Service to others may seem pointless, even foolish.

What should we do when we “lose heart”? The wisdom passed down over the centuries by holy women and holy men is to pray anyway, to serve anyway, to read the Bible anyway, to receive the Eucharist anyway. God has promised to meet us and be with us when we do these things, and it is up to us to trust God and cooperate with God’s methods the best we can. If we lose heart and give up during the dry times, we will never know the riches that will come if we persevere. May the Holy Spirit help us in all times – green and dry and in between – to follow Jesus and to pray always. In Jesus’ name. Amen.