

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 16, 2022

The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Luke 18:1-8

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The Practice of Prayer and the Practice of Justice.

or, 'practice makes perfect better.'

The story of Jacob wrestling during the night is both striking and perplexing. With whom is he wrestling? And why does this incident appear seemingly out of nowhere, as if dropped into the narrative? I think it is that context which helps us understand a little more about this famous passage. Jacob and his wives, and his children, and his flocks and herds were on the move; he had stolen the birth right of his brother, Esau, from his father Isaac. Now, some years later, he has just heard that Esau has discovered his whereabouts, and is on his way to meet him accompanied with 400 men. He realizes that, after all this time, he will now have to face up to what he did, to have a kind of 'come to God' moment. Knowing he will not be able to escape again, he shrewdly sends gifts ahead of him to Esau, and goes to bed for the night. And that is when he actually has his come to God moment. His fitful sleep is characterized by this wrestling – and, perhaps, he is wrestling as much with his conscience as he is with his adversary. The significance of that night is the fact that Jacob did not give up. He persisted until the one with whom he was wrestling quite literally tapped him out, but Jacob still refused to let him go. In that encounter, something remarkable happened – Jacob received a new name and, for the second time, a blessing. Only, this time, the blessing was from God himself: *"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."* *"And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel."* Peniel in Hebrew means 'face of God.'

You have striven, and have prevailed.

Similarly, our Gospel reading today is all about persistence and, like the story of Jacob and Esau, involves justice and a struggle.

The judge, in today's parable, was unjust. According to the Torah, he should have been impartial, attuned to the commandments of God and not open to bribery or corruption by powerful people. In particular, the judge was to protect the weakest in society; the poor, the marginalized; the aliens; the refugees; widows; and orphans. But Jesus describes a judge who was unfaithful to tradition and had a disconnect with the very people that he was called to serve: *"There was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people."* By contrast, of all people that Jesus could have used, he chooses the widow as the other character of this parable. Widows, as I have already suggested, were some of the weakest and poorest in society; in fact, they were considered to be *the* most in need. The Torah places them alongside the orphan as needing help because, quite literally, in a patriarchal society, they had lost everything.

The Torah placed strict instructions on those who had power and authority, and those who were chosen to sit as judges over the people in their affairs. We read in the Book of Deuteronomy 16:18-20, *"You shall appoint*

judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 16:18-20)

Did you note how justice is linked with the freedom that God had given his people when he called them out of slavery in Egypt? They who had experienced slavery, oppression, and injustice should, likewise, have justice and integrity as the hallmarks of community life.

One might think this parable is simply about the contrast between power and poverty; injustice and truth. But Luke tells us that the parable is not so much about the exercise of power as persistence in prayer: *“Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”* So why the widow? Why not someone who was experienced in prayer, such as a priest, or a Levite, or a scribe, or a pharisee? In choosing the widow, Jesus turned the concept of power and status on its head for the widow, who had nothing, refused to accept her station in life and, as Jesus explained, her persistence in seeking justice meant that the judge (who had no respect for God or people) felt worn down by her persistence. Imagine if Martin Luther King Jr. had given up the cause for racial justice and equality because those in power had no respect for him. Imagine if Rosa Parks had given up her seat on the bus, or, more importantly in relation to this parable, had lost hope during the yearlong boycott of Montgomery buses as the challenge to her arrest went through the courts. Imagine if Nelson Mandela had given up hope as he languished for 28 years in a damp prison cell. Imagine if Harvey Milk had given up hope of ending anti-discriminatory practices in San Francisco...I could go on, and you will have your own names that inspire you; the persistence of people, in spite of great opposition, sought justice and did not give up. And if you want a completely different kind of image, then imagine if the parishioners of Saint Thomas had given up hope after the devastating fire of 1905 choosing, instead, to throw in the towel? Imagine how they would have lost the vision of building the Choir School to change boys' lives, and being an oasis of prayer for midtown Manhattan. Their striving, their persistence led to an even more remarkable presence in midtown, just as the perseverance of King, and Parks, and Mandela inspired whole generations of black people not to lose heart; and Harvey Milk inspired gay, lesbian, and transgendered people similarly, not to lose hope.

So, this parable can be seen in a number of ways; because of its connection with justice and the care of the marginalized demanded by the Torah, it can easily be, as Luke suggests, the teaching of the Lord never to lose heart and to persevere in seeking out justice. After all, as the Baptismal covenant says in our tradition, *“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,”* - not some people, not ‘my’ people, but *all* people; *“and respect the dignity of every human being?”* Not some human beings, not the human beings that I like, or who are like me, but *all* human beings.

Luke suggests, it is a parable about prayer and the practice of prayer. Jesus brings together in a remarkable way the practice of prayer and the practice of seeking justice, and he brings them together. Jesus teaches us something about our Christian tradition in which we cannot just be thinking about justice, otherwise we become a church full of social workers and politicians; it is not just about that. Neither is it just about prayer that says “I do not want to muddy my mind with difficult things like that,” as if we were shutting the 5th Avenue Doors not simply to keep out the noise, but also the concerns of the city in which we live. Jesus wants us to be attuned to God which also means being attuned to the people around us – a real community of love – a beloved community. Jesus himself said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37b-38) In this parable, Jesus brings us a hard teaching – that the practice of prayer and the search for justice belong together.

But, for many of us, prayer is very hard once we move away from our formularies, our prayer books, and our rites and ceremonies. Those are aids to prayer, but they are not an end in themselves, for prayer is as much about a deepening of our relationship with God as it is about the recitation of words, no matter how

beautifully they are crafted. And prayer, if it is about depending our relationship with God demands that it also deepens the relationship with those around us; as the Baptismal Covenant says, 'with every human being,' respecting their dignity

I remember when Michael Ramsey was Archbishop of Canterbury, and the BBC interviewed him on television. He was asked a number of questions, but it was his answer to a question on prayer that received the most surprise. The interviewer asked him how long he prayed each day, to which the Archbishop replied, "*Oh, one or two minutes.*" The interviewer was completely amazed and said "*What!? You pray as little as that?*" "*Oh yes*" said Michael Ramsey, "*But it generally takes me an hour to get there.*"

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. My friends, the practice of prayer is hard; it is not easy at times, and it takes perseverance. Like Jacob, it means dealing with the things that crowd our minds – our failures, our frustrations, our fantasies, our petty grievances, even our shopping lists and anxieties about the business of our lives! Yes, even our sins. No wonder it is hard to pray, but the Lord encourages us to be persistent and not give up hope. To be persistent in the same way that we might strive for justice.

When I was first encouraged to pray by being silent, I was given some wise advice and I want to share it with you – it is very simple. If you find it hard to be still in a noisy world, with your mind filled with so many distractions, set an alarm clock or the alarm on your phone for just two minutes, make yourself comfortable, and still, and turn on the alarm. When the alarm goes off you stop, and get on with your day. But you have to do that for two weeks (persistence, you see). After a while, my spiritual director told me to increase the alarm to five minutes, but I still had to stop when the alarm went off. You can imagine what happened next – after several weeks of doing this, of simply practicing being still, something was happening – and, suddenly, the alarm became a frustrating interruption into what had become a *pattern* of prayer, far more than the things that used to cloud my mind. You see, I was beginning to enter into the stillness, into the silence, and after a month or two, I did not want it to stop! I was talking to our Head Chorister about practicing for concerts and practicing an instrument. I reminded him of what my music teacher used to say to me, "*Carl, practice makes perfect.*" Frankie looked at me and said, "*Ah, I was always taught that practice makes **better.***" I smiled because, of course, that is the whole point of this parable, that's the whole point of my spiritual director's little exercise – it will never be perfect, but perseverance certainly makes it better and, as Michael Ramsey knew, one does sometimes have to deal with an hour's worth of distraction before enjoying one minute's worth of real prayer, real communion with God. Henri Nouwen once said this, "Why should I spend an hour in prayer when I do nothing during that time but think about people I am angry with, people who are angry with me, books I should read and books I should write, and thousands of other silly things that happen to grab my mind for a moment?"

The answer is: because God is greater than my mind and my heart, and what is really happening in the house of prayer is not measurable in terms of human success and failure."