**22 Pentecost**

**October 16, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

This morning’s reading from Luke’s Gospel begins with the introduction, “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” The parable of the Unjust Judge and the Widow then follows.

The temptation is to equate the Unjust Judge with God, and to equate those of us who are praying with the Widow … if only we would pray hard and long enough God will grant our prayer if, for no other reason, God is tired of hearing our pleas. Not only is it tempting to read this parable this way, given the introduction, but many preachers over many centuries have done just that. Indeed, I am tempted to preach on our “need to pray always and not to lose heart.” However, using this parable to strengthen that idea I believe is a mistake.

The contours of this parable are familiar to readers of the Bible: a vulnerable Widow, seeking justice, stands before a powerful Judge who is anything but just. The Judge denies her again and again, but she hassles him so much that he finally relents and grants her request. Most people understand the parable as an illustration of the principle "from lesser to greater." That is, if an unjust Judge eventually gives the persistent Widow what she seeks, then surely a loving, just God will do even more for those "who cry to him day and night." Certainly, this is one interpretation of the parable … or at least a long-standing one … but I believe it risks turning God into a giant slot machine: pull the lever often enough and you will win the prize for which you have prayed.

I return to the introduction of this reading from Luke’s Gospel: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” I do not believe that the parable that follows belongs with this introduction. But that isn’t to say that the words of Jesus about our “need to pray always,” and “not to lose heart” are to be dismissed … indeed I believe these words are to be strongly proclaimed.

If we lift the parable out of the framework that the author of Luke’s Gospel has placed it … that is, if we take out the editor’s interpretation of the parable: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” … then we see a contest between God’s justice and the ways of the world. This Unjust Judge is obviously in a position of power … and he uses this power for selfish gain. The narrator in the text tells us that he “neither feared God nor had respect for people” and the Judge goes on to admit it in his own words. The Widow, on the other hand, not only wants justice in her case, but she wants to expose and hold accountable the Judge for failing to do his job. Since this Judge was not an elected official, and there was no TV upon which to air attack ads, the Widow had only one recourse … to constantly berate the Judge to hear her case. The Judge does not want this Widow to “wear me out.” In English it sounds as if the Judge is annoyed and tired, but the Greek word translated here as “wear me out” is actually a boxing term describing multiple jabs to the face that result in a black eye. The Judge is not just worried about his time, he is also concerned about his appearance in public … a heavyweight Judge besmirched with a metaphorical black eye by a poor Widow … how embarrassing would that be?

For me, this parable is not about pestering God to listen to my prayers. It is about the persistence of God’s justice to face the myriad examples of injustice and abuse of power in the world around us. And the way God does that is through you and me … through poor widows, and the homeless, and the unemployed, and the abused, and the marginalized, and the overlooked, and those that our society and the world sees as the most vulnerable.

The Widow stands on firm ground in her faith. For the past several weeks we have been hearing about the Jews in exile in Babylon from the Book of Lamentations and the Prophet Jeremiah. In our first reading this morning Jeremiah is reminding the people, that in spite of their plight, God has a new vision for them.

*But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

This vision is that God’s justice will be a way of life … it is not about mere legislation written in a book. It is about knowing right from wrong in one’s heart. And it is about the power of justice to hold accountable all forms of injustice in the world. The promise is that God will be with us, not only as an external force in God’s Creation, but also as an internal compass guiding us in the paths of justice. In Jeremiah’s proclamation of God’s new covenant we know who we are as children of God, and we know to whom we belong … past, present and future.

It is the essence of that proclamation that empowers the Widow to confront the Unjust Judge, and it is what can empower us to speak truth to power.

You have heard me use these words before, and most likely you will hear them again. The Catechism of our Book of Common Prayer defines “Prayer” as “responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words.” The fact is that the Widow’s persistent protest to the Judge is her response to God’s justice and is therefore a prayer of deed. We too are called to the same such prayer. Not just to fulfill our own personal agenda of healing in time of illness, or peace in the face of violence, or restoration of fortune following bankruptcy, or comfort in the midst of grief. All those and more are worthy of our prayer, but our prayer life is also to include living God’s justice. As the prophet Jeremiah reminds us:

*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me.*

Yes, we have a “need to pray always” in our “thoughts and deeds, with and without words”. As the Psalmist says the “words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart.” And we need to be emboldened “not to lose heart” in the face of the injustice of the world and the abuse of power.

Amen.