

**19 Pentecost
October 20, 2019**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

Though we have been apart for a while, I know many of you have been prayerful in many ways, about many people and situations. And tho' I have not been here, I have been very prayerful about you here at St. Cyprian's. So, this morning I would like to talk about the importance of persistence in prayer and the significance of today's Gospel parable in our lives. ///// The parable has an introduction which suggests why and to whom it was first addressed. We read, "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and moreover, not to lose heart." He is speaking to his disciples, to people who have been taught to pray and who do pray. But, these same people may be in danger of losing heart, losing hope. There had to be times when the followers of Jesus were in danger of losing heart because of the situations they faced, the lack of understanding on their own part, and the sheer weariness of travelling the road they were called to travel. Jesus told them this story in order to give them courage for the long haul, courage to continue in patient and persistent prayer. The parable is about prayer...their prayer and ours. "They ought always to pray and not lose heart." The parable is about faithfulness...theirs and ours.

Given the turmoil of their day, those early followers of Jesus needed his words and the promises of Scripture to strengthen them. And so they lived in hope, as we must do. If an absolutely uncaring judge can finally act, how much more should the people of God, filled with hope, EXPECT God to act lovingly on their behalf. In the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, the word "hope" is filled with encouragement and expectation. Consider Paul's words, written to the Christians at Rome. In Romans 5 he wrote "We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces endurance... and endurance produces character,... and character produces HOPE, ... and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."///// And, yes...I realize this is another of Paul's seeming ramblings, but when we follow it along, it really is encouraging. We move from "suffering" to "HOPE"

The important thing is "Upon what or whom is our hope based?" If our hope rests in "good luck", an unexpected turn of the game in the fourth quarter, kind of thing, then hope IS likely to disappoint us. On the other hand, if our hope is based upon God's promises, built upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit, then the meaning and experience of HOPE is very different. An expectant hope is a necessary ingredient in OUR Christian lives. In our Book of Common Prayer, toward the back, we have a Catechism, which teaches about our faith. To the question, "What is Prayer?" it answers, "Prayer is RESPONDING to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words." An understanding of this is pivotal if we are to comprehend what Jesus wanted to teach through this parable of the widow and the uncaring judge. Being able to hang in there in the difficult times is determined by the nature of our hope, about our holding on to the promises of God, even if hope's fulfillment is delayed.

The question Jesus addresses in this parable is, "Do we pray constantly, keeping our eyes fixed on God, whose will is our guide and whose faithfulness is the root of our hope, the very source of our hope? Do we live hopefully in our faith? Or do we increasingly feel hopeless? Somewhere I read a

quote from a Scottish preacher who once observed that ...”to say something is hopeless... is to slam the door in God’s face!” That is to be out of relationship with God!

The widow in today’s story from Luke was asking the judge to act on her behalf, maybe because she was destitute, or because her children were hungry. But, the judge, too busy, too lazy, or too corrupt to do his job properly, the judge stands as a symbol of the impenetrability of the system, or the brick wall some people face when they just can’t get out of the poverty trap. Whether the need is on a personal level or on the scale of international disaster, all too often attempts to bring justice are frustrated by the institutions of power in society. Politics, the justice system, welfare institutions, all of which are supposed to make life fairer, can be immobilized by corruption or bureaucracy. Many people eventually get worn down fighting the system, so in the pursuit of justice we can certainly be inspired by this story of the very persistent first century widow.

But, how does this help us understand prayer? If, as Luke tells us, God is not like the unjust judge, then why do we need to pray repeatedly? I think two things emerge from this puzzle. One important reality is that constant prayer shapes the person who prays. Persistent prayer strengthens our relationship with God. Repeated, habitual prayer gradually tests and sifts what we believe is really important. But, the *other* thing that strikes me is that the widow’s story connects prayer with public action. The widow needed justice that private prayer alone would not deliver, so she repeatedly went publicly to the judge. We are not called to pray passively, hoping that God will change the world on our behalf. Rather, as an African proverb says, “When you pray, move your feet!” Do something!

Banging on the judge’s door everyday must have been seen by others. Eventually, the judge was either embarrassed or annoyed into action, and the widow received justice for herself and for her children. The widow’s story seems to blur the distinction between petitioning in prayer and petitioning as public activism. Certainly it says pray and keep on praying ask and keep on asking; be persistent.

Prayer, as Jesus taught it, isn’t just a private matter. Prayer is about refusing to believe that the way things are has to be the way things will always be. It’s about imagining how the world could be, and about helping to bring it about. For some, this applies to issues of international justice. For others, like the widow, it means chipping away at the countless petty injustices that diminish ordinary people’s lives. Either way, prayer makes us refuse to accept a system that deals out injustice. /////

I read a story which illustrates how we often confuse God's timing with ours... and why persistence in prayer is so important. A country newspaper had been running a series of articles on the value of church attendance. One day, a letter to the editor was received in the newspaper office. It read, "Print this if you dare.... I have been trying an experiment this October. I have a field of corn which I plowed on Sunday. I planted it on Sunday. I did all the cultivating on Sunday. I gathered the harvest on Sunday and hauled it to my barn on Sunday. I find that my harvest this October is just as great as any of my neighbors' who went to church on Sunday. So where was God all this time?" // The editor printed the letter,... but added this reply at the bottom. "Your mistake was in thinking that God always settles his accounts in October!"///

When you think of it...That's too often our mistake as well, isn't it? -- thinking that God should act when and how we want God to act, // according to our timetable. The fact that our vision is limited, unable to see the end from the beginning, somehow escapes our mind. So we get frustrated; we think God is indifferent to us; we do not live by faith./////

In a Peanuts cartoon, Lucy has planned a picnic for the next day. She says to Charlie Brown "I just hope to goodness that it doesn't rain." Walking away, Charlie says, "Hoping to goodness is not theologically sound." Charlie Brown is right. Hoping to goodness is NOT sound. Fixing our hope upon God IS. In all honesty, are WE faithful in prayer? As Jesus asks at the end of today's parable, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

With that in mind, let's back track and take another look at Jeremiah.

In our first reading we see Jeremiah as a magnificently resilient human being. Instead of feeling despair, Jeremiah continues to be hopeful and encouraging. Instead of presuming the end of the relationship between God and the people of God, Jeremiah expects the opposite. We heard, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will SOW. Notice the wonderful word...SOW, with all its intimations of future growth and possibility. Even though all around him things may seem grim, Jeremiah now reiterates the theme of promise that always lies within the divine purpose. We heard, "So, I will watch over them, to build and to plant, says the Lord." Jeremiah could see that the future was going to be very different from the past. It would demand a different kind of religious experience, a new faith. To use his language, it would be religion written on their hearts...no longer just information ABOUT God, but a relationship WITH GOD, within oneself. These thoughts of Jeremiah may help us to reflect in our own day. In our culture, up to about the middle of the last century, the basic question for Christians was, "How can I know more ABOUT God?" Now we are increasingly asking a different question. "How can I have an experience of God?" or "How do I have a relationship with God?"

Well, from attention to today's scriptures, certainly one way to grow closer to God is to be persistent in prayer. May we increasingly know that God IS with us and therefore, be ever more constant and persistent in taking everything to him in prayer.

Remember, as Jesus said to his disciples, so he says to us, "pray always and do not lose heart."

AMEN