

Weekend of October 19-20th: Gospel of the Unjust Judge

Lately it seems as though I haven't gotten any of the "fun" gospels and today is no exception; actually it is one of the most difficult parables. We don't even know what to call it: is it the parable of the unjust judge or the parable of the persistent woman? Interestingly, this parable is only found in Luke's gospel as Luke often took up the plight and role of women in his writings.

Sadly, we do sometimes view God as someone who is disinterested in our needs, someone remote from us and because of this perception, we often feel the need to wear God down with our petitions. And along these lines in today's parable, Jesus is nudging us to emulate the widow in her persistent faith. He is holding her up as a model for our prayer. After all, she would not have continued in her request for justice if she had no faith that her needs could be met. This is the confidence, the faith and the persistence we are to bring to our praying. Consequently, we are being told to pray with the kind of faith that counts.

There are, however, two types of persistence: one is a stubbornness to get our way at all costs and another is an abandonment to the will of God.

Along these lines, I would like to tell you about Mary Brown—a made up name—who I knew when I was pastor in Ashland, Oregon. Mary came to daily Mass, usually praying for her adult sons—sons, from my point of view-- that only a Mother could love. Well one day she prayed for the return of her silverware which had just been stolen. And pray she did: week after week, month after month. Meanwhile, I was told by a policeman that if the silverware hadn't been recovered after a couple of days, then it was surely melted down and sold. And so in desperation, I would occasionally use the weekday homilies to talk about letting go and moving on, but then when it came time for the prayer of the faithful, Mary would counter my not so subtle message by praying for the return of her silverware. It was something like dueling banjos and the daily Mass crowd took immense pleasure in my failed efforts to win Mary over. But then one day, Mary prayed in thanksgiving for the return of her silverware, which absolutely thrilled the folks at daily Mass. Mary had won and they were delighted in seeing their young, inexperienced pastor put in his place.

Unfortunately, a few years later her husband died of cancer and that time Mary did not get what she prayed for. Certainly we need to realize that mystery is very much involved in our prayer life: God is God and not some puppet we can manipulate; after all, God does not need to be reminded of what is ultimately best for us.

The truth is that there is certainly a big difference between faith and superstition. In faith, there is the belief that God has free will and that He will only do what is right and good for us in the larger scheme of things. But in superstition, there is the belief that if we make certain incantations, perform certain acts, even pray certain novenas that God will have no choice but to give us exactly what we want, even if what we want is misguided. To this end, we need to learn how to trust in God's supreme love and goodness and that is why our Lady's prayer—let it be done onto me according to thy will—is held up as the model for all prayer.

What I failed to communicate to Mary is that God is not some sort of forgetful god who needs to be reminded of what we want. God responds to our prayers on the basis of His God-ness and not based upon our persuasive arguments. And so we can turn against God for not answering our prayers in the

way that we wish Him to or we can maintain our trust in God and God's love for us, even when we don't get what we want. Of course perseverance is one quality of prayer, but there are still a lot of puzzling questions about the link between our prayers and God's will.

We may not be able to understand this mystery, but we can at least see some aspects of it because even when our petitions seemingly go unanswered, praying enables us to cope with our problems as it brings us into contact with God. But then when I pray to God to protect a beloved wife from suffering and death, and she dies horribly anyway, I still have to ask: Why didn't God answer this good, heart-felt prayer?

This is a perplexing question and it drives us to the core of our faith, stretching our understanding of God and erasing any trite or simplistic explanations that we may have regarding the problem of evil, suffering and death.

Jesus wants to encourage his followers to take prayer seriously and to take our loving God seriously. He knows that prayer is our connection to the mystery and majesty of God. But again prayer is not giving God orders; prayer does not reduce God to being our servant, obligated to fulfill our requests.

Certainly Jesus does not provide us with a tidy answer that solves the mystery as to why God sometimes does not seem to respond to prayers as we think that He should. Perhaps then it would be helpful for us to recall that when St. Paul was persistent in his prayer for a healing from the "thorn in his flesh" that God's answer to him was that there is strength in the weakness that such a thorn gave him.

And then on the cross, Jesus himself lifted a prayer to the silent heavens when he cried out: my God, my God why have you forsaken me? And this prayer went unanswered until Easter gave us all a new perspective on Good Friday.

And so this seems to be the point that Jesus is teaching us about prayer in this gospel--to keep praying, not because prayer forces God to answer, but because prayer keeps us in relationship with the One who can be trusted, even on our darkest days when our prayers seem to go unheeded. And so when we don't get what we want, then we should dig in our heels and search for other doors that are being opened for us. Consequently, we must decide if we actually believe that God loves us more than we can imagine or deserve?

Recall that Jesus once said: Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, would give him a snake instead? If you then, who are so much less loving and caring than God, know how to give a good gift to your child, then how much more will your Father in heaven give what is needed and best to those who ask him?

And so the real question that each of us must ask ourselves is: do I trust God enough to give God the wheel of my life or do I insist on maintaining control because I think that I am a better driver?

Again, I don't think that the basic reality of prayer is about asking and receiving, but about being in contact with God. As Chesterton wrote: we pray in order to know that we are not alone.

Another insight into God as our Father is from the Parable of the Forgiving Father otherwise called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. There, in a pig sty, the wasted son decides to go home and cast his broken, smelly body on the ground and ask if he can work for his father in the fields as a servant. But when the father sees him, he runs to his son: Why? Because the father had already decided what he was going to

do before this ungrateful brat even starts his “I’m so, so sorry speech.” The Father takes the boy in and brings him home not as a servant but as a son because he is his father and that’s what loving father’s do.

And so we need to understand that God is listening even before we start praying. God wants so much to be in contact with us that nothing that we do—and we are all capable of doing some pretty stupid and self-destructive stuff—can separate us from the Father’s love.

But now I would like to suggest a twist to today’s parable. Instead of focusing upon God as this remote and insensitive judge, why not look at the widow as a God-like figure; and when we do, the message of the parable is that when we resist injustice and denounce it until right is achieved, then that is when we are acting in the name of God.

Moreover, it reveals godly power in apparent weakness; after all, this seemingly powerless widow ends up achieving a victory for justice. And this message achieves its fullest force in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

After all, Jesus too seemed helpless in the face of his executioners, but he was able to transform his apparent defeat into the defeat of the powers of sin and death.

So then let us be a people who prays, prays hard not so as to convince God of the righteousness of our cause, but pray so as to be in contact with a God whom we have come to trust. We are encouraged to ask for things from God, but with a trust in a God who loves us more than we even love ourselves.

Furthermore, it has been said by numerous spiritual writers that prayer is not meant to change God; it is meant to change the one who is praying.

After all, the Christian life is a continual journey of moving deeper into what has been learned about God and about ourselves. When taking a trip, we start out with enthusiasm and feel liberated as we leave our customary world behind. But then we encounter numerous challenges that are part of any voyage, leading inexperienced travelers to stop and ask: Is it worth it? Should I go on? But the seasoned travelers will reply that the journey is worthwhile despite the annoyances. And the same is true in prayer—persistence means forging ahead despite the obstacles in the journey; but it also means a reckless abandonment to God and the ways of God.

And so as people of faith, we are asked to trust God to give us what is best for us IN THE LARGER SCHEME OF THINGS and then like Mary, to pray “not my will, but your all-knowing, all-loving will be done.”