

Sermon proper 24C1 October 16, 2022 Fr. Nick Smith

Jeremiah 31:27-34 Psalm 119:97-104 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 Luke 18:1-8

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

So, in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus gives me an excuse to speak about one of my favorite topics, Prayer. Prayer is one of the most important responses to the abiding question "what's the faithful thing to do?" I note that it's a response, not an answer, because our understanding of prayer always seems to be evolving, and just when we think we know what it's all about, some new insight or experience leads us on to further questions. I expect that is what Jesus hoped would happen. On today's stop along the road, he reflects on what he notices in the society around him by telling this parable of the poor widow and the evil judge. The widow is being thoroughly disrespected by this powerful, arrogant civil servant. The story has some shock value for the disciples, I suspect, because in that society there were 3 classes of people who were to be especially cared for: widows, orphans, and resident aliens. By the teachings of Judaism, they were to be shown special mercy. And yet, here is this widow, who society, represented by this civil judge, is continually dismissing as a pain in the neck. Nevertheless, she is persistent, God bless her heart, and keeps coming back for another shot at justice. She wants a blessing. She wants her life to be blessed. And the judge keeps brushing her off.

Luke narrates the reflection this way: Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. The widow in the parable seems to have simply worn the judge down when he finally decides to listen to her case, but the literal Greek is a little more interesting than our English translation in the New Revised Standard Version. The Greek phrase which is translated here as "this widow keeps bothering me" actually means "this widow might give me a black eye!" She's going to box her way to justice! The humor is sadly lost in our milder translation. This is kind of like a political cartoon, in which we're not laughing with the powerful but evil person, but at him, where the person is caricatured as amusingly ridiculous. But this is the story Jesus tells his followers (maybe with a bit of a chuckle) to help them understand their need to pray always and not to lose heart. They should be persistent in their will for blessings. And, of course, God is not like the corrupt judge, but will swiftly seek to grant the blessings they need. Persistence is a sign of faithfulness; or, perhaps better said, faithfulness is persistent. It doesn't give up. True faithfulness never gives up. And then Jesus caps off the story with the provocative leading question: Hmmm, I wonder if when the Son of Man returns, when God looks around this world in years to come, will faithfulness be found on earth?"

A story about Mother Teresa comes to mind. She had travelled far from her life among the poor in Calcutta to New York City to meet with business executives to raise money for her ministry. Humble and persistent, she described the urgency of the need as only she could. However, they had decided before she entered the room that they would not write her a check. After a while of polite listening, they told her no. She paused, bowed her head, and said, "let us pray." At the end of the prayer, she again described the invaluable help they could offer. Again, they said no. And, again, she paused, bowed her head, and said, "let us pray." They stopped her right there and wrote the check.

Our gracious God, we believe, strives to give us what we need...not everything we might want, but what we need... to prosper in goodness and faithfulness. Typically, that comes in the form of opportunities God creates for us, opportunities to go through, go around, even go up and over. But God seems to also rely on our own persistence, our own perseverance, our own diligence in prayer and action. We have the freedom, certainly, to sit back and let life wash over us, randomly and chaotically, but that will not bring us to the great feasts at the Temple (metaphorically). Only pilgrimage will achieve that, pilgrimage often through dusty and dangerous places (metaphorically). Sometimes we seem to be walking that pilgrimage alone, sometime together with others. Sometimes we are praying alone, and sometimes we are keeping the prayers together with others. In our Episcopal-style services, we frequently say responses together in unison. We try to do it persistently, like the poor widow, week in and week out, lifting our voices and our prayers as one

body. Even the Lord's Prayer is said in plural. (Our Father...give us...forgive us as we forgive). This, of course, does not mean we necessarily all have the same thoughts or perspectives, but it is a common witness that our relationship with God binds us together just the same. Out of many, one. And, we believe, it is a faithful thing to do.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah, when people will no longer need to preach to each other to 'know' the Lord, for in those days, everyone will already have come to know God. Is this just wishful thinking, or could it actually happen? And what would be the result? Well, if you think about it, before you can place trust in anyone, you need to get to know them first. And that kind of trust is certainly necessary for what we call faith. Prayer is all about getting to know God, to feel God's presence and recognize it, I think. That knowledge grows and evolves as we make room for God in our daily thoughts and routines. Remembering that God has provided the opportunities we can enjoy, that God is always enthusiastic about helping us find a way out of dilemma and disappointment, and that God makes us loves us and keeps us, is knowledge we should always carry in our most convenient pockets. That knowledge helps us grow a more foundational, persistent, and trusting faith. So that when we are ready to ask What's the faithful thing to do, we have a point of reference, a place to start. Prayer embraces both the question and the response. Prayer is the common denominator of faithful choices.

Here's another Mother Teresa story: On another such excursion from India, Teresa visited Freiburg in southern Germany. There the bishop led her on a tour of the huge cathedral, the Munster, and was excited to point out the magnificence of the place: the three elaborate pipe organs, the linen altar hangings, the gold adornments of the altar and all the side altars, the tapestries, the antique stained glass, the banners, the statuary, the marble columns, and all the impressive gothic architecture. Having paid close attention, Mother Teresa paused, and then turned to him and said, It's lovely...now all you need is to get rid of all this stuff and turn this sacred place into a prayer chapel.

How would you describe prayer? What do you think should be considered part of a life of prayer? Yes, we keep the prayers together in church, and yes, prayers of thanksgiving over our meals are useful, too. But what else is prayerful for you? I have been known to observe that we pray not only by what we say, but what we do, too. And there are wonderful, even mystical traditions of silent prayer, when we listen for God's Spirit to guide and inspire us, as we sit quietly and meditate. There are times when we open civic functions with a sort of prayerful invocation, helping to center us all in a good frame of mind. There are the prayers of the sacraments, and the blessing of quilts, and the graveside prayers when we lay loved ones to eternal rest. I once had a spiritual director who kept his morning prayers by strolling the wooded trails observing God's creation. Having a good cry, in my experience, is just about as prayerful as it gets. In truth, there is probably no moment in our lives when we are not in prayer, whether we recognize it or not. God is always listening. God is always speaking. God is always present. God is always calling us to be in relationship. And mysterious, marvelous miracles are always a possibility when that relationship is firmly glued in place.

Don't you just sometimes envy the Disciples? OK, so envy is not one of the 7 virtues...but don't you just wish you could stand in *their* sandals for a bit? Their daily give and take with Jesus would be like the mother of all prayers, wouldn't it? Thankfully, the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit has enabled us to access the divine will and the divine mind through intentional prayer. Ask and you shall receive, seek and you will find. Unlike the evil judge, the Spirit welcomes our persistent prayer and all our chaotic neediness. And our prayer life evolves, grows, matures, and deepens like any relationship can. With a little nurture, it may even result in faith on earth when the savior returns. Hmmm. Sounds like a lot to hope for, but then prayer is nothing if not hopeful, after all. And, thanks be to God, we have companions along the way, here in this parish, here in this community, with whom to sing and smile along the way. God, make us good stewards of our friendships, and send your Spirit, we pray, to encourage and enliven us for our journey together, that we may be persistent in our faith, true in prayer, and focused on your blessings along our way. Amen.