

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena, Illinois
October 20, 2013

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text—Luke 18: 1-8

On a Saturday morning a bit over three years ago, I was at St. James Cathedral about to be finally ordained as a transitional deacon, having spent enormous amounts of time, effort, and resources on this transition from one denomination's ordination to Holy Orders in the Episcopal Church. Linda Packard was there, and when she saw me in the aisle near the baptismal font, she laughed, patted me on the arm and said something like, "If I'd had time, I would have bought you a card that said something about the persistent widow."

Yes, during that endless time of preparation, many people mentioned my persistence. I was never entirely sure if they admired my sticking it out through delays and procedural changes, or if they secretly thought I was a bit out of my mind.

The other thing I don't know for certain is just why I kept on. I truly didn't think that God cared a whit whether I was an Episcopal priest or a UCC pastor, but the tug was strong and steady. What I do know is that each time I got discouraged and considered dropping out, something happened to lift my heart and restore my resolve. It was never a dramatic revelation, just a small thing. So how prayers were—or were not—being answered was often a mystery or surprise.

Today's parable does not immediately sound like it's about prayer. We might not think of it that way, except that Jesus bookends the story with words about prayer and faith. It begins with, "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart." And ends with Jesus asking, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The parable has two characters—a judge and a widow. In the ancient world, judges sat at the gates of the city and settled disputes. They had no courtrooms, no juries. They were expected to be honest, wise, and followers of Jewish Law. This judge was none of those things.

The widow in that society had no status. Once her husband died, any possessions went back to his family, not to her. Yet Jewish Law required that "the little ones," widows, orphans, and strangers, be cared for and protected. So this judge, by his failure to help the widow was not obeying the Law or living the faith. In fact he said he neither feared God

nor respected people. Though he gave in to her plea, it was for his own comfort—to escape from the annoyance of this squeaky wheel. Not out of fairness or mercy or even concern for her plight. He is a contrast to the loving God: if even one like this dishonest, self-serving judge will act, how much more will God do for those who come to him.

Jesus lifts up the widow as an example of persistent faith. And asks how many like her the Son of Man will find.

Last week, Linda talked about praying always. And about how it is our intention to pray that is important. The words themselves don't matter so much—in fact, she mentioned the phrase attributed to St. Francis—“pray always, use words if necessary.” I think we often get hung up on getting the words right. Or we worry about “bothering God” with our constant prayers for the same things over and over again. We sometimes think of God as a cosmic bellhop or a vending machine where, if we push the right button, what we want will pop right out. The saddest thing I hear from people about prayer is when they “give up” because they feel that God is not with them when their prayers are not answered the way they want or as immediately as they want. They lose heart.

I am reminded of the little pillow on a chair in my office, a gift from a former parishioner. It has an embroidered stick-figure girl with crazy hair and the words, “It's me again, Lord.” I laughed and laughed when it was given to me. It brought to mind my repetitive prayers, often about my failings. And I used to wonder if God got sick of my bringing the same old tired things. Would God one day lose patience with me, tell me to pull up my big girl pants and get over myself?

Now I try to think more of my repetitive prayer in terms of intention. “It's me again, Lord. Here I am just wanting to be with you for a while.” I ask for help for myself and others, to be sure, but try to calm my mind and my fears and enjoy being quiet, enfolded in God's love and warmth. I know that God doesn't need reminders of what I want and need—my prayer is not to change God's mind—well, sometimes, maybe it is. It's more likely that I will be changed my soul shaped, by becoming more aligned to what God wills and wants. The operative words, of course, are “I try.” For I often fail and am back at boring myself with my whining to God. I am heartened though by thoughts such as these by Glenn Hinson:

....persistence in prayer is not a matter of persuading a reluctant God, but rather it is a matter of disciples remaining faithful....[it] is how we remain faithful as we await the fulfillment of the gospel.

It is not about “getting things.” It’s about learning to be faithful, learning not to lose heart.

And we must not forget justice. Jesus’ promise is about God’s granting justice to those “who cry to him day and night.” Kate Huey reminds us that we should not measure our faithfulness about “how often and how well we pray” but by “how much we long for, and work for, justice and healing, making the world a better place for those who trust us to be reliable and merciful and good. Magi Dawn reminds us that

Prayer as Jesus taught it isn’t just a private matter. It’s not personal therapy or a crutch for the weak. Prayer is about refusing to believe that the way things are has to be the way they will always be, about imagining how the world could be, and gaining the wisdom and the energy to bring it about.

I sometimes wonder if Jesus meant us to think of one of these parable characters as God. Not the unjust judge, but the widow. Continually nudging us, pushing us, inviting us to use whatever gifts or positions we hold in ways that are honest and faithful, bringing mercy and justice to all around us. Hmmm.

Amen.