

October 16, 2022

Year C: Proper 29 (2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8)

Tom Long tells a story about Mother Teresa going to visit a couple of very wealthy, very high-powered lawyers. She was raising money for an AIDS hospice, and these lawyers were in charge of a charitable trust that she hoped would help. Before she arrived, the two were discussing the charity and how they really didn't want to give it any money. They agreed that they would listen politely to what Mother Teresa had to say, and then, equally politely, say that they weren't interested.

Mother Teresa arrived, looking very small and frail, as she did. She perched herself on the edge of a huge chair across from the big mahogany desk, and made her appeal for the hospice. When she was finished, one of the lawyers said "We are very touched by your appeal, but the answer is no."

Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." The lawyers were a little surprised, but they bowed their heads and listened while Mother Teresa prayed quietly. When the prayer was over, Mother Teresa started her pitch for the hospice all over again – repeating exactly what she had said the first time. When she was finished, the lawyers again politely said no. And again Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." After the third time around, the lawyers pulled out their chequebooks!

That story could substitute very well for the parable we heard this morning: a sort of modern-day, updated version. But, like all parables, its deeper message would need a little bit of careful thought. Some parables need a little explanation, and some need a lot of explanation. And most parables lend themselves to a few different, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations if you dig around a bit. It's a bit tough on the casual reader, but it does keep preachers occupied and out of trouble.

The parable we heard this morning actually started with its own explanation, as if the gospel writer was worried that we wouldn't get it. It is, according to the gospel writer, "a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

The story is about a judge, who “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” That implies that he was not so much interested in justice as he was in using his position for his own advantage. We wouldn’t be surprised to know that he could be bribed quite easily, and that his judgements were likely to favour anyone who could do him a favour in return.

At that point in the history of the Jewish people, judges were municipal authorities, assigned either by Herod or by the Romans, and they had considerable authority. They were not Jews, and usually had no respect at all for Jewish law or religion. People listening to this parable would have immediately recognized this judge as a non-believer who had a great deal of power, and very few scruples.

The listeners would also know that women were not allowed into a courtroom at all. Women’s cases could only be heard in court if there was a man willing to advocate for them. This woman evidently had no man to speak for her. And since she couldn’t go to court, she was approaching the judge outside of the court, in public places. She had to be very desperate, as well as powerless.

In fact, the widow was about as far away from the judge in the social order as you could get. She was alone and vulnerable, with low standing in the community, no influence at all, and no one to advocate for her. Widows were often very poor, especially if they had no grown children to take them in, and they had to rely on the charity of the local synagogues for their survival. A devout Jew would recognize a responsibility to help this woman, but the judge definitely wouldn’t.

Her situation was hopeless, but she was just not going to give up. She pestered and badgered the judge, persistently demanding his attention to her case. She was insistent that the judge defend her against her adversary, and she wouldn’t be ignored. She kept going back to the judge and demanding that he do his job properly.

Eventually, he got fed up with her going on at him all the time. His public image was

suffering, and he was starting to feel worn down. It's probably to his credit that he decided to "give her justice" rather than getting rid of her in some other way, so he was not a really evil villain, just a self-centred, insensitive scumbag.

The gospel writer says at the outset that this parable is about two things: (1) the need to pray, regularly and often, and (2) living with faith and optimism, never giving in to despair. If you see those as two separate pieces of advice, you know that both will be of benefit. Many commentators, however, conflate the two into one, and that leads down a disturbing path.

The message of this parable is often explained as being that, if someone like that judge can be persuaded by persistence, then surely God, who already wants to help, will respond to our persistence in prayer. The next step in that line of reasoning, very often, is that, if you just keep on and on praying for whatever it is you want, you will eventually get it. Some people say that in those very words. And others will even tell you that they know certain prayers that will guarantee that you get what you want, as if God could be ordered about and controlled, like a butler, or a genie in a lamp.

That line of reasoning is very troublesome. As the Rev. Mark Sargent says, it fosters "the notion of prayer as the divine vending machine. You put in your faith. Be sure to put in enough. Pull the lever, and get what you want...."

If "persistence" and "not losing heart" refer only to prayer, it is a wonderful example of $2 + 2 = 5$. And, despite how many times we have been asked to believe that over the last two and a half years, it still isn't right.

When we pray, we gain perspective on our lives, and we acknowledge our belief in God. We put ourselves into the presence of God, and look carefully at ourselves and our lives. Most of us probably learned the acronym ACTS as the outline for prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. *[You can make other acronyms with those four letters, but they don't work as well. Think about it!]*

Everyone prays sometimes, even if it's only two or three words in a moment of panic, but the habit of regular prayer does so much more. The very act of praying acknowledges that we believe that we belong to God, and the act of prayer also gives us quiet moments to reflect on our relationships, our lives and our directions.

We recognize that we have not always been the person God would like us to be. We give thanks for all the blessings that we have received, and we ask God to help us by protecting those we love, and walking beside us in whatever challenges we have to face. Regular, heartfelt prayer is life-affirming and beneficial.

If we don't fall into the vending machine trap, then the second message in the parable is that we should never lose heart. It's easy to say that we should keep our chins up no matter what happens, but we know that's unreasonable: sometimes we are entitled to a little misery. But total despair is a big misery that does nothing but feed on itself. Ask anyone who suffers from depression, or who has a loved one who is depressed.

It's not always easy to find the glimmer of hope, but we have all seen how people who refuse to lose heart find it easier than those who despair. As Christians it is our job to live in hope. We will not right every wrong in the world, or even in our families, in our lifetimes, but we should never give up trying.

In the parable of the persistent widow, God didn't intervene. It was the widow's persistence alone that led the judge to act justly. In the Mother Theresa story, God didn't change the lawyer's minds: she did. There is great power in hope.

I found this little story that makes that point very well:

A man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing--we're behind."

"Oh dear!" said the spectator, "I'll bet you're feeling really discouraged."

"Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't gotten up to bat yet!"