

# Pentecost 20 - Proper 24

Adapted from one by The Rev. Barbara Beam, Sermons That Work 10/21/2001

*Genesis 32:3-8,22-30; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14--4:5; Luke 18:1-8a*

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable. This parable of Jesus is commonly called the story of the unjust judge and the widow. It can be a troubling parable. I am indebted to the Reverend Barbara Beam who preached a sermon on this gospel in October of 2001 for the perspective, thoughts and words that guided me today. In verse 1 of the gospel, Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable to his disciples to show them they should always pray and not give up. With this as the introduction, an obvious interpretation then, when we read this Gospel, is to see ourselves as the widow, fervently pleading with God (the judge) until finally our prayers are answered. We know, or as Christians should know, that God is not like the unjust judge of the parable; but the implication is that "if even such a wicked man will give in when he tires of the widow's pleas, then surely a just, merciful, and loving God will be that much swifter to answer our prayers." (Beam) As many of you know, in my role as Music Director I choose the hymns for Sunday and this Sunday was particularly difficult. As I searched for hymns for today, as always I used Hymnal guides that suggest hymns that support the lessons for today. Many of those hymns that were recommended, had verses that referenced God as judge of our lives furthering the connection of the image of God as the judge. In the words of our opening hymn this morning we sang "As our judge, thou wilt appear." No wonder we have an image of God before whom we appear when we die, opening "The Book", asking us to justify the acts of our lives - an image often merged with Santa Claus, "making a list and checking it twice".

But today, as the Reverend Beam suggested, let's look at this parable from a different angle. Let's suppose that this widow, with her persistent demands for justice, represents God [I suspect historically and culturally, God represented by a woman was not a traditional way to think about God, of knowing "him"], and *WE, you and I*, are the unjust judge, who neither feared God nor had respect for people. For me, the past week has brought several examples of that disrespect both large and small:

- The letter to the editor in the Marshall paper this week claiming that the people in the homecoming float holding a Mexican flag were illegal aliens who took jobs from us "good Americans" and whose children brought disease, and who should be speaking English, the "original" language of this country.
- Even in the seeming little things - the "I paid for this course" attitude which allows one to be rude to the professor (a claim I encountered

this week), and then hearing that right to rudeness extended appalingly to:

- The students at the Petey Pablo concert at the university who took over the wheelchair section of the audience and when asked to move back, many used obscenities to refer to the students with disabilities claiming they “should go home”, that they didn’t belong.
- Yesterday I listened to a commentary on Public Radio and heard a spokesperson for the NRA, not just state their political position on the right to bear arms, but claim that those that supported the bill in Congress extending the ban on assault weapons were not just misguided, but “evil”.
- The tone of this election and how we deal with those of a different political persuasion, not just by advocating for our positions and why, but with name calling and denigrating characterizations.
- And in our own denomination, we await the outcome of the Lambeth conference on the issue of homosexuality and the American consecration of the Reverend Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire.

Will we find a way to live “in tension and diversity of thought”, the way traditionally of the Anglican communion, or will we, in our communion, follow the tenor of the times, unwilling to look past our traditional ways of knowing, unwilling to ask if God is calling us once again to justice, unwilling to ask what qualities, other than who one loves, were so deeply respected that a people, a community, called him to leadership. What are we being asked to look beyond, to see?

Look again at the judge of the parable. What does Jesus tell us about him? We know that he is “unscrupulous, without decency or conscience. He doesn’t respect people; there is no fear of God in him. He is a closed universe. This judge always has it figured out; he leaves no room for the possibility that *God may have a more creative answer* to questions he faces in life.” [Beam, emphasis mine] There are parallels between that judge and all of us in the issues we’ve faced this week. Is it possible that we, in the acceptance of the disrespect shown by others, or even disrespect shown by ourselves, are that judge? Are we not leaving room for the possibility that God’s ways are larger than ours?

Is it not possible that it is God, as with the widow in the parable, who wrestles with us, as he did with Jacob, who “continually calls us, who continually asks for something from us, who just won't let us alone until our resistance is broken down, *until we are willing to look beyond ourselves*”,

beyond our heritage, our culture, our beliefs, our ways of knowing - and yes even our ways of loving.

Again the words of the Reverend Barbara Beam: "In fact, in the history of God's people, this does seem to describe the way God often behaves. Remember Jonah, running in the other direction but finding that he couldn't run far enough to get away from God. Think of St. Paul, breathing righteousness in his persecution of the people of The Way, until God caught up with him on the road to Damascus."

Doesn't God sometimes act like this with us? God has been persistent in calling us to knowledge of him, to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Perhaps I, we, have become complacent in our religious faith and we need to hear God calling us today to a *deeper* commitment. We may not always want to hear God's call. We may have our own agenda, our own political beliefs, our upbringing, our own ways of knowing. Perhaps we have come to put our trust in these, the ways of this world instead of in the ways of God. But God won't stop his coming to us with his plea for us to find more creative answers that are inclusive, not destructive of our fellow human beings. We can tune him out, turn our backs, believe that we hold the one true way so we can rest easy, but God doesn't stop calling. God really is represented in the widow woman.

And as you think about the widow; remember that what she was so persistently pleading for in this parable, was *justice*. God calls us also to further the cause of justice in this world. "Remember the words from the prophet Micah: 'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.' When we renew our Baptismal vows, we promise to seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and to respect the dignity of *every* human being." [Beam, emphasis added]

In what ways does God call us to strive for justice and peace this week?

It may be in our day-to-day practices, in the work that we do, or in the way we treat others. The widow woman was persistent in her demands for justice, and so must we be. And when we do that, we behave in a God-like way. We make ourselves available to God, and God uses us:

- as, I believe, he used all those who responded to the letter this week, calling us to recognize not only the racism of the first letter writer, but of the value of our differences in heritage, language and customs.

- as I believe he used the student security guard who attempted to move the crowd back, or even Petey Pablo himself, both of a culture not of the majority, who acknowledged the humanity of those sitting in wheelchairs.
- as I hope he uses us to reject the rhetoric of name calling and to let even those with whom we agree politically, know that denigrating others is not the way of peace and respect.
- as I hope and pray that we are willing to be called, in our church and in our communities both large and small, to find new ways to live in “the tension and diversity of thought”, to find new and creative ways to live for justice and peace.

Throughout our lives God continues to call us. God's call is persistent, and so long as we live, God will call us. We will never arrive at the place where we can say, "There, now I've done my duty. My name will be there in the Good Book" God's call may be different at different times in our lives, but there is always more to hear, to listen to, to do. “At times we listen well, at times perhaps not so well, but God's voice is never stilled. Each time we hear and respond, we become more the person God calls us to be.” [Thanks again to the Reverend Beam]

Amen.