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Genesis 32: 22 – 31
2 Timothy 3: 14 – 4:5

Psalm 121
Luke 18: 1 – 8

Today, we have Jesus' parable of the unjust judge. Or the parable of the unrelenting widow, depending upon whom you choose to listen to. Scholars and commentaries are rather widely divided about today's parable and what it might be saying to us. Is today's parable about faith, or persistence, or prayer, or relationship or what? Are we the unjust judge or the widow? And depending upon that answer, what does this parable say about the nature of God, or how we are to live our life in Christ?

Thomas Keating, Cistercian monk and father of the modern centering prayer movement, writes that parables are mirrors in which we are invited to look at ourselves. A parable is also a 'pearl of wisdom set in a particular context by the Gospel writers for pastoral purposes.' We have to remove the jewel from its context, like extracting a pearl from an oyster, in order to get to the heart of the reality proposed by the parable. [V. Potapov, *Synthesis*, 10.17.04] In doing so, we are 'shocked into an experience of who we are and what motivates our conduct.' Parables give us insight, a way of knowing that is not just head knowledge but heart knowledge infused with the love of God.

Scholars even differ on how much of this parable is probably original to what Jesus said and what, if anything, was added later, either by Luke or some other editor of the manuscripts. The Rev. Larry Patton raises the possibility of the original words of Jesus being verses 2 through 5, or beginning with Jesus saying, "In a certain city..." and ending with "...so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." That means that the introduction, telling us the purpose of the parable, and the conclusion, about God's action and our faith, were perhaps added. If verses 2 – 5 are removed from their immediate context, perhaps the parable is *not* primarily about prayer. Perhaps it's about relationship.

We don't know anything about this woman, Patton says, other than she achieves justice. We know nothing about her case, and Jesus never calls her good. But Jesus does tell us that the judge is like the Grinch, a no-good, rotten scoundrel. Patton questions whether perhaps this parable is not so much about prayer and persistence, or rather more about these two people and their relationship.

Patton notes that it is too easy to hear this parable as an encouragement for persistence in prayer, whether in quiet, personal prayer or in loud public prayer. If it is, then why doesn't it address what so many of us have experienced: praying our hearts out over and over again with no sign that God has even heard, much less responded to our hearts' desires? How many of us have prayed for years, either for ourselves or someone we love, about an addiction, or for curing rather than death, for the perfect job, the perfect match, the perfect weight – only to consistently feel like a failure and never achieve our goals?

Patton points out that the widow's relationship with herself, and her commitment to achieving justice for her grievance, mean that she understands her values. She knows why she keeps getting out of bed every morning. This unnamed woman is a widow, powerless and probably penniless. Since she is by herself (she's *supposed* to be taken care of by husband's heirs), she also apparently has no other means of recourse or any male relative willing to support her. She can give up, or she can take matters into her own hands.

This widow tries every means possible of entering into a relationship with this judge – post-it notes on his door, voicemails, emails, messaging, texting, Instagram, pounding on his door, standing in front of his house with a placard on a pole. Everything. She isn't some shrinking violet, cowering in a dark corner, hoping the judge might deign to hear her still, small voice. This widow is willing to name, perhaps shout, what she wants, day in and day out, over and over again, whether or not she gets what she is after. Because that is how she remembers who she is in this society which makes her practically an outcast.

The judge, for his part, has a relationship with this widow, albeit a contentious one. He is so tired of hearing her and seeing her. Her harangues probably haunt his dreams. What is translated in the NRSV as "so that she may not wear me out by continually coming" actually comes from a boxing term in the Greek. It really says something more like "so that she may not wear me out with continued blows under the eye." This judge is aware that everyone else has seen this widow hanging around him, too. He doesn't want to have to be seen out and about with a black eye and then try to explain to his peers how it happened. Everyone will know that this widow has gotten the best of him. So, the fact that he finally responds to her and grants her justice is not so much about him having a change of heart as it is about him afraid to lose face, lose honor, with his neighbors. It's not about justice; it is about conceit and pride.

So if this parable *is* about relationship more than it is prayer, what does it say about God? And us? Are we the persistent widow, trying to be in a relationship with a God who grants us our petitions simply because God is tired of hearing us and wants us to go away? Or with a God who needs Sabbath rest and we are a disturbance to that? Or with a God who is somehow concerned about saving face and loss of honor? No. The parable reflects the rabbinic way of arguing from lesser to greater. So if even this no-good, rotten scoundrel can meet out justice, then of course our God of grace and mercy can. What if we are the judge in the parable and it is our loving, gracious and persistent God continually knocking on our door, desiring more than anything to be in relationship with us?

The Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton compares today's parable with a running gag on the TV sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*. For those not familiar with the show, it's about a group of socially inept scientists and their friends. On a regular basis throughout the episodes, the character of Sheldon goes and knocks on his neighbor, Penny's, door.

Sheldon, reminiscent of the widow, doesn't just go stand in front of the door, knock meekly and wait for Penny to answer. Rather, he goes to the door, knocks very loudly repeatedly and calls out "Penny!" Then he knocks several times again, calls out her name, and continues the cycle until, finally, an exasperated Penny opens the door. Penny, like the judge, doesn't answer the door because she wants to see Sheldon; she answers it because she's reached her limit of what she can take. She answers the door so that Sheldon will stop.

This running gag in the sitcom doesn't always turn out the same way, because the reason Sheldon is seeking out Penny is always different. And, deep down, Penny actually for Sheldon, even if he is a pain in the patoot. Penny invariably listens to Sheldon's outpouring and off-the-wall request, says no and firmly closes the door. But Sheldon returns, knocking loudly and firmly until, once again, Penny opens the door. Eventually, Penny always finds a way to help Sheldon with resolving his problem, and usually, the answer to the dilemma comes from him, not her.

So perhaps relationship *is* what this parable is all about. Relationship with God and prayer as the dialogue – and sometimes, perhaps often, seemingly a monologue – that connects us with God in a relationship. C. S. Lewis famously wrote, “I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. [Prayer] doesn’t change God – it changes me.” And that’s where our relationship with God and our ongoing conversation take us. Prayer changes *us*.

Which brings us back around to those times when we pray our deepest, most sincere prayers, only to feel like we are talking to a blank wall, or the words are drifting out into cyberspace. “At these moments,” Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “superficial prayers gradually become easier than the deep ones do because it is less painful when they seem to go unheard. And then, not praying at all seems to be the least hurtful path. If we don’t ask for something, then we won’t be disappointed when it doesn’t happen the way we want. If we don’t seek, then we’ll never know what we’re missing. Of course that all leads to a gradual deadening of the heart.”

What the widow realizes is that it is important to keep on knocking, to keep on crying out in prayer even when, or perhaps most especially when, our prayers seem absolutely meaningless. And to trust the process that keeps us engaged with God, with one another, with what matters most to us, and with our own hearts. In today’s Epistle, Paul also urges us to persist, whether the time is “favorable or unfavorable (2 Tim. 4:2). Paul encourages us to struggle, much like Jacob does, with our needs and with God, with the utmost patience, realizing that God’s concept of time is not ours.

For us to be authentic in our life of faith, we have to include those things that mean the most to us, risking ourselves with God, exposing our vulnerability, and offering up those things that bother us the most. It is in our deepest, darkest moments that our illusions of control, of self-sufficiency, of power, of making it through life unharmed, are stripped away. If we allow ourselves, it is also in those deepest, darkest moments when we find that we can place all our needs, our trust, our hope in the love that God has for us, and God’s willingness to go through that very same darkness on the cross. When the things we pray for mean as much to us as the things about which the widow is pestering the judge, and when our persistence in prayer is coming from the heart, we make ourselves radically open to God. And the scandal of the Gospel is that God is always radically open to us. +