

Proper 24C 2016 Stewardship Sunday Sermon

October 16, 2016

Psalm 121:1-2, 2 Timothy 4:1-5, Luke 18:1-8

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills; *
from where is my help to come?
2 My help comes from the Lord, *
the maker of heaven and earth.

So begins our psalm today.

It is a message that it is so easy for us to forget! If we look at our world and our lives from the mindset of our current American culture, it is so easy for us to think that our help is going to come from what our culture values. (And let's admit that most of us look at our world and our lives, most of the time, from the perspective of our culture; for just as a fish is surrounded by water and cannot get away from it, we are surrounded by – and breathe the air of – our culture!) And our culture would have us believe that our help will come from being successful or well-liked, working hard, having enough money in the bank, or getting **our** presidential candidate elected. But one of the reasons we come to church each week – perhaps the *most important* reason – is to remind ourselves that in reality our ultimate help does not come from what our *culture* values, but from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

My friends, this is our grounding, our foundational meaning and truth. Being centered in God, drawing our life and our energy from participating in the life of the Holy Trinity. It all begins here. It all begins here. Re-connecting with God, reminding ourselves of what our **true** life is *really* about, week after week, in worship, song, prayer, Scripture, sermon, teaching and learning, welcoming the stranger, being fed in the sacrament with the very life of Christ, raising up our children in this God-centered family, then being sent back out to love and serve the Lord in the world.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable, which begins, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people." A widow comes to this judge asking that justice be done. Now in interpreting this parable, we first need to try to appreciate what this story would have meant to its hearers in *Biblical* times. What does the Bible say about judges and widows? Well, Moses gives instructions to judges, saying, "Judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment belongs to God." (Deuteronomy 1:16-17a) A "judge" in Old Testament times was supposed to be judging according to God's will and with the mindset of God. To say that a judge "neither fears God nor has respect for people," like the judge in our parable, is to say that he is the exact **opposite** of

what the Bible says a judge must be and do; he is violating those very commandments which Jesus says sum up the whole of the Law and the Prophets: “Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself.” This judge seems to believe that fulfilling his vocation as a judge has nothing to do with God or loving his neighbor. And, my friends, I can’t help but think that many of us Christians today have come to believe that “separation of Church and state” means that we can carry out *our* vocation, live out *our* daily lives, cast our vote without any connection to God and God’s command to love our neighbor as ourself.

Meeting here together in this place, week after week, being formed through worship and Scripture and prayer and sacrament and teaching and learning and community, we are reminded where our **true** lives are centered, and strengthened in our connection with God and our fellow members of the Body of Christ.

Regarding how people of Biblical times viewed **widows**, *they* were some of the most vulnerable members of society, and the Bible repeatedly exhorts God’s people to care especially for widows. The psalmist says that God is the “Father of orphans and protector of widows” (68:5), and the early Christian Church gave widows special attention. The Letter of James states, “religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (1:27)

Now, the status of widows is very different in **our** culture than it was in Jesus’ day, so we must ask: Who are the “widows,” the most vulnerable classes of people, in **our** society today? The poor, the mentally ill, the homeless, those who were raised in dysfunctional families and have no clue how to function in a healthy way in society – you can undoubtedly add more to this list. And “to keep oneself unstained by the world?” Is this not saying that we should not be drawn into the spirit of violence, racial animosity, and hateful and disrespectful language that are so unbelievably prevalent in our world today?

“In a certain city there was a judge...” What city? and who is the judge? Since parables are stories with *eternal* meaning, Jesus is talking about *every* city of *every* age and nation, including our own; and the judge in the parable is every one of us who can choose to act justly or not toward the vulnerable in *our* society.

Are these Biblical values reflected in the attitudes, language, and action of most Americans today? I think if we are honest, we must say they are not.

In our Epistle, St. Paul warns Timothy that “the time is coming when people... will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires...” Again, my friends, that time is now. We choose which news outlet to listen to – selecting the one that will report and interpret the news the way *we* like it reported and interpreted. Some news items which do not support the bias of our chosen news outlet go unreported. These are some of our “teachers which we have

accumulated for ourselves to suit our own desires.” Other teachers in today’s world are those who set the standards for our culture, be they sports figures, movie stars, popular singers, TV producers and writers and commentators, Madison Avenue, social media, etc. We accumulate for ourselves these “teachers” to suit our own desires – desires which, in many respects, have been *planted in* us by our culture. Take, for example, the over-sexualization of all media – from television to Facebook to movies to rap musicians to the ads you see on the internet. There is a reason that in the *Daily Record* this past week we read about courses being offered to our teens to treat their addiction to sexting. And that reason is not a failure on the part of our *teens*, but on the part of us adults and the culture **we** have developed or allowed to develop.

Then there is the *language* that is used in our society. Leslie Leyland Fields, a columnist for the conservative publication *Christianity Today*, recently wrote an insightful article about how carelessly we use language, without thinking, and how that affects our whole society. Referencing some of the language used in the current political campaign, she writes: “We know that our words have the power to unleash into the world goodness or wickedness, truth or falsehood, life or death.” She quotes author and pastor Frederick Buechner, who wrote:

In Hebrew the term dabar means both “word” and “deed.” Thus to say something is to do something. “I love you.” “I hate you.” “I forgive you.” ... Who knows what such words do, but whatever it is, it can never be undone. Something that lay hidden in the heart is irrevocably released through speech into time, is given substance and tossed like a stone into the pool of history, where the concentric rings lap out endlessly. —Wishful Thinking

Leslie Fields remarks, “We’re all experiencing the chaos and destruction from both candidates’ ‘stones’”¹ tossed into the pool of the collective life of our nation.

I could go on and on about the state of our world today; but you already know what I’m talking about. From where is our help to come? Our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. That is the only **true** source of help! Not getting **our** candidate elected; not stacking the Supreme Court with like-minded judges; not building walls on our borders; but being grounded in God, who is love and life itself. My friends, there has never been a time when the Church of Jesus Christ has been more needed than this present time!

And I don’t mean we should simply go and publically brandish or zealously protect the Christian “label,” posting the ten commandments or a manger scene or a cross on the courthouse lawn, or getting all up in arms when a store clerk says, “Happy holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas.” No. I mean living out our lives, day in, day out, as the Body of Christ in this world – Christ’s life and love living in each of us individual parts of the Body, and Christ’s life and love living corporately as his Church in and for the world.

And, my friends, it is happening here at Christ Church! Our children are being formed in the teachings of Jesus; our youth serve in worship and we support them as they go on retreats into God's creation at Quest weekends and summer camps, where they are formed by faithful leaders among other youth from all over our state. Adults participate in formation programs such as Adult Forum, Men 4 Him, Faith-Seeking Journey, Lenten studies, Centering Prayer groups. We support outreach efforts through our Lenten Journey, sponsoring a child at El Hogar, our Second Sunday Offerings, money earned through the work of devoted members working at the Thrift House, our Good Friday offering, Festival Fair, and more. For the very first time in the 18 years I have been here, we have started a hands-on, person-to-person outreach ministry in our community: Laundry Love, where we truly do "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself," as we promise in our baptismal vows. We have also developed a relationship with some of our neighbors down the street at Villa Carina, and hope to strengthen those relationships. Episcopal Bishop and theologian Andrew Doyle writes, "The future Church will have affection for the society and be inextricably connected to it... As we find our community and are rooted within it we will also find there neighbors, friends, loved ones, and strangers with whom we share our place."² Churches and other organizations in Canon City are working together in a way I have never before experienced to address the problems of the homeless and desperately poor in our community. (We have another meeting this afternoon!) At Christ Church, we have prayer ministers to pray with people before our services, serving as channels of God's love. We have a prayer team that offers daily prayers, a Pastoral Care Team that responds to pastoral needs, women who sew prayer quilts and baby blankets as gifts to newborns and those who are ill. A devoted group among us is looking into how we might reach out to feed the *spiritual* hunger of those in our community who are "spiritual but not religious" – a rapidly growing segment of our population. Our life together as fellow members of Christ Church is strengthened in such gatherings as St. Gabriel's Guild, potlucks like the one we have today, and the ever-important Coffee Hour, sometimes called the "eighth sacrament," where we get to know each other better and develop closer bonds of affection. We are strengthened by the increased involvement of more and more of our members in the larger Church, including the Church Development Institute, our regional gatherings, and Diocesan Conventions, which feed us, connect us, and build up the Body of Christ in this corner of God's Kingdom.

My friends, I can say unequivocally that there is a depth of spirituality within our parish today which has never been greater in the 18 years I have been among you, and that depth of spirituality continues to increase and mature. People are coming to Christ Church and staying because they recognize an authentic spiritual depth and connection to the Living God among us, and an openness, acceptance, and hospitality that is genuine.

On this Stewardship Sunday, I am not, as I have in years past, showing you charts and graphs about our budget. Each of us needs to be mindful of the financial challenges we face at Christ Church as we prayerfully and thoughtfully make our pledges today.

But focusing on money (which is what our culture focuses on) runs the danger that we come to think that stewardship is about meeting a budget, rather than generously and joyously giving to support the life and growth of God's mission and ministry in and through this place, of which each of us is an indispensable part. The theme for this Stewardship Sunday is "A Much Better Way," which comes from the introduction to Paul's transcendent chapter on the primacy of love above all else. (1 Corinthians 12:31; 13)

My friends, the Church has never been more needed than it is today, for it offers an alternative to our culture of violence, greed, racial discord, rampantly uncivil and destructive language, polarized government, and "What's in it for me?" mentality. The Church, the Body of Christ in this place, Christ Church, **is** making a difference, and offering "A Much Better Way" – the way of participating in the life and love of God at the very core of our being, and bringing that life and love to a broken world. *This* is what we support with our pledge today: not a budget, but a mission – an alternative way of living, so desperately needed in this world; a way grounded in God, the maker of heaven and earth.

AMEN

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2016/10/12/word-by-word-creating-and-destroying-the-world/>

² "The Future of Stewardship," *Adapted from A Generous Community: Being the Church in a New Missionary Age.*