

Proper 24C

October 20, 2019

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Fr. Richard Rohr had long been involved in issues of justice and compassion for society's outcasts, for he was a follower of Jesus, who himself was constantly engaged with the poor, the widows, the prostitutes, the lepers in his day and age – society's outcasts. What Fr. Rohr came to observe, however, was that a lot of the Christians who worked for issues of justice tended to take on the very attitudes of the people whom they saw as their *opponents*. Those in power had little compassion for the outcasts of society; and the social justice people had little compassion for the people in power. Indeed, they were often even *more* hostile and mean-spirited than their powerful opponents. What was missing? Richard Rohr realized that the social justice people with whom he worked were pushing their *own* agendas, not being open to God the Holy Spirit working through them, which was the key to **Jesus'** life and work. And so, in 1987, Fr. Rohr began the *Center for Action and Contemplation*, with the conviction that *both* are needed: carrying out God's actions in the world while being infused and energized by contemplative prayer and the Holy Spirit.

Our Gospel parable this morning depicts much the same situation, and offers much the same answer.

"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"

Now Biblical scholars tell us that the phrase translated "wear me out" actually says, in the original language, "give me a black eye". One scholar notes: "Giving a black eye" is an image for tarnishing a reputation. A judge is *supposed* to give **justice** and he does not want to be known for *not* giving justice. This

woman's persistence will show him up as an unjust judge. He does not want this. He wants the *pretense* of justice on the **outside** even though he is *not* committed to justice on the **inside**. He wants to be *known* as just."¹

The unjust judge is vulnerable to being exposed for what he is – a hypocrite – and this fear will eventually drive him to give justice. The relentless widow unmasks *in*justice until justice is given, even if it is given only reluctantly.

But the question arises: "How are the hearts of widows *sustained* during this relentless effort?" Jesus gives the answer: They pray to God day and night.

Now if you are like me, you have probably heard sermons on this parable that draw this as the conclusion: "You must pray relentlessly." Or as Winston Churchill might have said, "Never, never, never, never give up praying."

But Fr. John Shea finds a problem with this interpretation. He writes: "Conventional religiosity loves to turn this parable into a teaching on perseverance in prayer. It immediately envisions people petitioning God for a specific purpose and not getting what they want. They are tempted to give up. But if they keep persisting, God will relent. So, the message is: don't lose heart, turn up the volume. God caves in with persistent petitioning.

"[But] this popular interpretation [splits apart] what the parable struggles to keep together. Personal spirituality and social justice are two sides of the same coin. Praying to God is for the purpose of effecting social justice. God answers the cry for justice by [suffusing] justice into the hearts of the ones who cry. [Then, with empowered hearts, they bring this justice into the affairs of earth.] In this way the ones who pray will endure because they will be grounded in God.

"That is, *if* the ones who pray manage to pray always. 'Always praying' means the channel between God and the human person remains open. [REPEAT] Divine energy will not periodically spurt and then dry up. Rather, it will be a steady, empowering flow. Therefore, the ultimate source of the energy that wears down injustice will be coming from the boundless source of the passion for justice."² God.

"'Praying always' is only possible if the ones praying are [symbolically] widows. As a literary character, the widow -- in herself -- is a powerless figure. She has no resources of her own to rely on. If she manages to wear down a hard-as-nails judge, the [assumption] is that she has had help. When the powerless who seek justice take down the powerful who refuse to give it, a careful investigation will uncover the hidden agency of God. The energy of wearing down is *mediated* through the widow, but it does not *originate* with her. It is the result of her communion with God made possible by her continual praying [continually keeping the channel between God and herself open]."³

This combination of praying always and not losing heart is further developed in Luke in the later scene of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:33-53). As you remember, Jesus takes with him Peter, James, and John and tells them, “**Pray** that you may not come into the time of trial.” Jesus stays awake in prayer, but the disciples fall asleep. As Jesus prays, an angel visits him, strengthening him for the upcoming contest. This praying is necessary for Jesus to persevere in the mission he has been given.

When the crowd comes to take Jesus away, the disciples, who have *not* prayed, resort to violence. They cut off the ear of the slave of the high priest. But Jesus, who **has** prayed, restores the ear. The disciples have yielded to temptation and become as violent as the men who have come to arrest Jesus. But Jesus has not yielded to this temptation and continues to reconcile enemies. The key is that Jesus prayed always, allowing God’s peace to suffuse his heart and inform his actions.

And so, we see that “Not to lose heart” means more than merely persevering in the face of difficulties. It is more than not giving up. It is being open to the Holy Spirit, coming forward with love, and being faithful to the ways of peace. The temptation in wearing down injustice, as Richard Rohr discovered, is to become *more* unjust than what we are attempting to wear down. We win on the terms the *unjust judge* sets. We fear God *less* and respect people *less* than the *unjust judge* does, and so we can overcome him with *more* violence than he is able to muster. However, we can resist this temptation when we integrate our hearts into the heart of Jesus. He is the relentless widow who prays always until his heart becomes the heart of God.

The point of the parable is that we are all called to do the same. And I know that there are many of you in our parish who do just this: You care for the outcasts in our community in tangible ways. You attend court hearings, give people without shelter a place to sleep at night by sleeping with them in our church basement, serve as hosts at Laundry Love, share food with the hungry through Loaves and Fishes or our Little Free Pantry, mentor and encourage others. You work at the Thrift House or Festival Fair to make money which is then used to support El Hogar in Honduras and other charitable causes. You offer professional services free of charge. You give to local charitable organizations through our Second Sunday Offerings. You hire those who are having a hard time making ends meet to do odd jobs. You treat others with respect, knowing that that other person **is** Christ.

Where does the energy and inspiration come from to relentlessly carry on this work without resentment, ego, or a sense of superiority? It comes from keeping the channel open between oneself and God. Committing oneself to regular practices of prayer, through which the Holy Spirit heals, replenishes, inspires, strengthens.

Do we, in participating in this flow of the Holy Spirit, always succeed? Are we

perfect Christians? No. But we *strive*, over and over again, to be relentless widows who pray always until our hearts become the heart of God.

Amen

- 1 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 290
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 291-292
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 292