

Date: October 21, 2007

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 29

**SERMON: Prayer, Hope, and Justice**

Text(s): Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 17:20-21; 18:1-8

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When I arrived at my new parish in New Brunswick, New Jersey, one of the first people I met was a man named Carl, who, I quickly discovered, was already well-known to all the other pastors in town. At that time, about half the city of New Brunswick had already undergone some urban renewal and regentrification, while the other half still had some pockets of fairly grim poverty. Our church sat right on the boundary between the rejuvenated half and the half that was still filled with high-rise, low-income housing projects.

Carl lived in the poor half with his mother. At least most of the time; every so often, she'd get angry at Carl and throw him out, and then he'd be on the streets for awhile, but eventually she'd take him back in. Carl had a lot of disadvantages. He was born into poverty, had little or no formal education, he was unemployed and unemployable, because he'd fried his brain on drugs and alcohol at some point, so his grasp of reality was, to say the least, tenuous. And while he had a perennially cheerful and amiable attitude, he also had a history of violence, particularly against women. So he scrounged; he lived by what few wits he had, begging, mostly from the churches in town, where he followed a regular circuit. He would run errands for shopkeepers for a few dollars, and he would steal anything that wasn't nailed down. But it wasn't Carl's particular situation that distinguished him from the others who came seeking help.

What made Carl stand out was that he was the most persistent person I've ever met. There were not many weeks during the seven years I was there, that I didn't have at least one, and many times, multiple encounters with Carl. Carl had a knack for coming at the most inconvenient times, like walking into the middle

of a wedding rehearsal and yelling "Hey Rev, can you help me out a little?" He'd sometimes meet me as I walked from the parking lot to the church door with a shopping list: he'd begin by asking me to book him into a hotel room for the night. (This was usually when his mother had thrown him out in the street.) When I'd refuse the hotel room, he'd ask to borrow my Visa Card so that he could book himself into a hotel room. When I didn't give him my Visa Card, he'd ask me for a food voucher to buy a bag of groceries at a nearby supermarket. (I had learned by experience not to give him vouchers because he'd promptly sell the bag of groceries to someone else to get money to buy marijuana.) When I didn't give him a voucher, he'd ask me for money to buy lunch at a nearby restaurant. (I had also learned not to give him cash.) Finally, he'd work his way down his list to a cup of coffee. "Well, Rev.," he'd say, "could you just give me a cup of coffee and a sandwich." By this time, I'd be so eager to get rid of Carl, I'd usually give in, not to giving him the money, but to walking up the street to the restaurant and paying for his sandwich and coffee myself, leaving him there so I could get back to my "real work." I'd try to convince myself, following Mother Teresa's example, that when I looked into Carl's face, I was really looking into the face of Christ. And I do believe that in a profound way, but it didn't make dealing with Carl any easier, nor did it awaken any feelings of real empathy in me for Carl, because it's hard to feel empathy when someone is in your face breathing alcohol fumes and pestering you incessantly for help that you really can't give. Truth is, I gave in to Carl to get him out of my face.

My thinking about the parable of Jesus that is our gospel lesson today can be divided in to B.C. and A.C.— before Carl and after Carl. Before Carl, I had always read this parable with a somewhat superior attitude and even anger against the unfeeling judge. After all, the judge had the position, the power, the social and political clout to really do something for this powerless, widow. And widows in the ancient

world, along with orphans, were just about the most powerless people in society. A woman's whole identity and role in society was defined by her husband, and when her husband died, she literally had no place. If she didn't have adult children who would take responsibility for her, she was without recourse. She was essentially a non-person, and had to survive, either by becoming a prostitute if she were still young enough, or by begging and scrounging in garbage heaps. (Interestingly, the earliest Christian communities were noted precisely for their care for widows and orphans. The office of deacon evolved specifically for that ministry.)

The judge, who in those days, sat at the gate of the city and made himself available to render justice to those who had some case to press, was inclined, like everyone else, simply to dismiss this widow as a nobody. He tries ignoring her, but she won't be ignored. Day after day, there she is, confronting him with her need and her demand for justice. And finally, he gives in just because she finally wears him down with her persistence. He doesn't give her justice because he cares about her as a person; he gives her justice because he wants to get her off his case. Hardly the most admirable motivation, is it? Sort of like me and Carl.

After Carl, I could identify with the unrighteous judge in this parable who only gave the widow the justice she demanded because of her persistence. I knew that probably most of Carl's problems were not of his own making; I didn't blame him for being a victim of a systemic culture of poverty. But I knew that he'd always be back, knocking at my door, always asking for my help, always confronting me with his need, always reminding me that there was a world full of Carls out there, a world full of need, always expecting me to meet that need in some way, even if it was only a sandwich and a cup of coffee. So, like the judge in the parable, I'd eventually give in to Carl's persistent demands and give him something at least of what he

sensed he needed, though I was never under any illusion that what I did would change anything for Carl. He'd still be Carl, the usually amiable though sometimes violent, half-witted con-artist, working the street, getting by, surviving by his sheer persistence if not by the merits of his case.

Encountering Carl, I discovered that the poor or the downtrodden are not always people that elicit real feelings of compassion from us. Poverty and injustice are not simple things. The causes are often quite complex and deeply woven into economic structures, social institutions, and cultural attitudes, and we're not always sure we know how to address such complexities at the systemic level. And while we may be strongly committed in theory to rectifying social injustice, it's another thing to have to deal with the individual people who are caught in that systemic web of poverty. My worry is that most of us live such busy and over-scheduled lives centered around our own families, and insulated from the realities of the social injustices we deplore, that unless we have a Carl in our face, we simply don't even think about it except occasionally in church on Sunday.

Jesus, in telling this parable, doesn't seem to have been all that concerned about the motivation of the judge in helping the widow. Luke says, "*He told them this parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*" Nor is he saying that God is like the judge, only granting justice when we pester God enough for it. In fact, he says just the opposite; he contrasts God with the judge. "*And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to those who cry for it day and night.*" The point of the parable is not so much to emphasize the differences between the cold-hearted judge and the warm-hearted God, but rather to say that we ought to be as persistent in our prayer and in our work for justice as the widow was persistent in pressing her claims on the judge. Just as she recognized that the judge had the authority to grant her justice if he only

had the will, we are to recognize that God has both the authority and the will to “feed the flock with justice,” as the prophet Ezekiel reminded us. And that recognition should cause us “*always to pray and not to lose heart.*”

That’s the great danger for all of us, isn’t it, that we might lose heart in our quest for justice in this world. We look around us and we see a world that is a veritable ocean of injustice. One of the most frequent questions we ask or hear others ask is “Why does God allow such injustices to happen?” You see, it’s not really the human part in the injustices of the world that we question; we know human beings act unjustly. We’re perfectly clear on that. We are not naive about the capacity of the human heart for evil or injustice; we know ourselves too well for that. It’s God’s part that we’re not so sure about. If God cares about justice, if God cares about us, then why doesn’t God step in and do something? And the longer God delays in stepping in, the more we begin to lose heart, which is to say, the more we begin to lose our faith. Jesus’ question at the end of the parable becomes *the* pertinent question: “*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*”

What does that question mean? Well, if the opposite of faith is losing heart, or losing hope, which is the same thing, then faith must have something to do with persistence in making our needs known, persistence in working for justice, even when we’re not always sure where the path of justice lies. Faith trusts that God does know where the path of justice lies and God cares about justice; therefore we keep working away at our calling to be the agents of God’s justice because we trust that God has both the power and the will to work through us and make justice prevail, even when the day is long and the work is hard and the visible signs of progress are few.

I suspect we already know that. But I also suspect that we have a different notion than Jesus of what the word “quickly” means when he said, “*Will not God quickly grant justice to those who*

*cry for it?*” We want God to act according to our timetable, and in a way that does not require so much from us. We want a Divine Parent to step in and separate the squabbling toddlers and make them share their toys fairly. Bound in space and time as we are, prisoners to some extent of our own history, limited in our vision of the future, we measure the progress of God’s sovereign and just rule by our own yardsticks, and when our yardsticks prove to be too short for the task, we lose heart and become world-weary and cynical.

This confusion of our timetable with God’s and our reluctance to accept the burdens of our vocation to be the agents of God’s justice reminds me of the story of the small-town newspaper that ran a series of articles on the value of regular church attendance. One day, a letter to the editor was received in the newspaper office. It read, “*Print this if you dare. I have been trying an experiment. I have a field of corn which I plowed on Sunday. I planted it on Sunday. I did all the cultivating on Sunday. I gathered the harvest on Sunday and hauled it to my barn on Sunday. I never went to church at all. Yet I find that my harvest this October is just as great as any of my neighbors who went to church on Sunday. So where was God all this time?*” The editor printed the letter, but added his reply at the bottom. “*Your mistake is in thinking that God always settles his accounts in October.*”

We probably make the same mistake much of the time. And that mistake makes us, like the farmer, into practicing cynics. We confess belief in God’s power and goodness; we say we believe that God wills justice. But we give up pressing our claims in faithful prayer and action. We want a faith that makes us feel good but which keeps the messy world outside. We don’t have the persistent faith of the widow in the parable. We don’t really take seriously the petition we pray repeatedly, “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*”

When we pray that prayer, we need to remember that Jesus told us that the kingdom of

God is already among us. The kingdom of God's justice and peace is present, even in the midst of the injustice of the world as it is. Our very existence as the church is the sign, or should be, of the presence of that kingdom. Our calling is to be heralds of God's just reign. We are heaven's outpost, heaven's colony, if you will, who in our life together are to model the kind of just relationships and just social structures that characterize the kingdom of God. When people outside the church look at us, they should be saying, "Ah, so that's how God intended people to live together!" But we must always remember that even as we struggle to model a just community here and now, we are always living and working for that future in which God's sovereign and just rule shall be universally known "on earth as it is in heaven." And so we continue to persist in prayer and work, to persist in praying *Thy kingdom come*. We live in hope between the already and the not-yet. That trust in God's good purposes and the persistence in praying and working for those purposes to be fulfilled is what it means to live by faith. And living by faith is the only way to avoid losing heart, to avoid falling into despair.

That is why, as the hymnwriter put it, "*Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native air.*" Prayer is the fundamental mode of our existence. Prayer holds us in being and in relationship to God. Prayer enables us to learn trust in a God who loves us and who loves the creation enough to redeem it. Prayer teaches us the patience of faith, the endurance of hope. Prayer keeps us from losing heart. If the Son of Man is to find faith on the earth in that day when all creation is restored to its original justice and peace, it will be because the community of God's people has kept that faith alive through the faithfulness of our work for justice and the persistence of our prayer.