

Lectionary 29 (C)
19th Sunday after Pentecost
October 16, 2022
Text: Luke 18:1-8

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In the Overlook neighborhood, there's an apartment complex, the Prescott apartments, that includes a number of affordable units that are supposed to be priced for tenants who earn less than 60% of our region's median family income. Unfortunately, the Prescott apartments have a new owner, an investment company, whose primary interest seems to be squeezing every penny they can from their low-income renters. They've issued rent increase notices of 50% and more to people who are already living in challenging situations, and they are creating the conditions for more poverty, more struggle, and more homelessness.

I was heartened to see that residents of the Prescott apartments were protesting the harm being done to them. They carried signs that said things like, "High rents put families in tents," and were calling on the Portland City Council to close the legal loopholes that make this kind of obscene exploitation possible. They may not be powerful people, but the residents of the Prescott are not willing to be victimized in silence. And in that way, they remind me of the widow in Jesus' parable that is our gospel story for today. In the patriarchal society of Jesus' time, widows were among the most vulnerable people. Without a man to speak for them and advocate for them, they had no voice, no power, and they were easily taken advantage of. But the widow in Jesus' story is also unwilling to be victimized in silence.

In ancient Israel, judges had a special responsibility to look after the widows and orphans, those who had no one else to speak for them. While we don't know what this widow's complaint was, we do know that this judge was completely unresponsive to her concerns and her needs. He even describes himself as someone who has no fear of God and no respect for people. It sounds like he's unmotivated to do anything that doesn't benefit himself. But this widow keeps coming to him and calling for justice. It's too bad that our translation takes the edge off of the widow and her attitude. In our translation, the judge laments that he's worried the widow will wear him out by continually coming to him. But in the Greek, the judge says he's worried the widow will give him a black eye. I think he means that metaphorically, that he's afraid that she'll give him a bad reputation... but you never know!

Jesus told this story about the need to pray always and not lose heart. If you've ever been grieved by the immensity of unnecessary suffering in the world, and if you've ever struggled against entrenched powers that benefit from the way things are and don't want things to change—like the unjust judge in Jesus' parable—then you know how difficult it can be to fend off discouragement. It is hard work to fight against the fear that nothing will ever change—that the poor will always be taken advantage of, that the wealthy will always have all the power (and be indifferent to the suffering of the poor). Jesus wants us to know how much we need to be vitally connected to God and deeply rooted in Jesus' vision for the reign of God in order to stand up for justice. If we aren't, then we will be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the world's suffering. We'll be beaten down into despair or cynicism. We'll be unable to resist those who,

like the unrighteous judge, have no respect for God and no compassion for their fellow human beings. That's why it is so important to pray always and not lose heart. It's such a beautiful directive: to pray always and not lose heart—and a deeply spiritual exercise—a practice of turning concerns over to God and asking God to provide the stamina and courage we need.

I worry, though, that in our general culture, the things we hear about prayer make it seem like just words—utterly meaningless. After every episode of gun violence, politicians tweet about sending “thoughts and prayers” to the families wounded by this most recent tragedy, but then they show no inclination to take action that would lead to real change. It's like prayer itself becomes part of the problem—a sign of apathy in the face of human suffering, or a performance piece that absolves the pray-er of ever having to do anything at all. But that's exactly the opposite of what Jesus invites us to do. The widow is a model for us. Jesus wants us to emulate her persistence, maybe even her intensity, in how we pray and in our concern for justice.

There are so many different ways to approach prayer. We can use the traditional words of the Lord's Prayer, or we can engage in a free-flowing conversation with God. We can use the words of scripture or the hymns of the church as a source for reflection, and a way of trying to see the world through Jesus' eyes. We can light candles and sit in silence. We can practice meditation or contemplative prayer as a way of opening our hearts to God. It can be something we do as individuals or share with a group. When Rabbi Abraham Heschel participated in the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, he said it felt like his legs were doing the praying. No matter how we pray, it's about being connected to God and connected to Jesus' vision of the human family, where every person is loved by God, where generosity and compassion and forgiveness are the way to live a humane life. The power to not lose heart doesn't come from the method of prayer that we use. It comes, instead, from the One we're connected to, the God of mercy and love who has made Godself known to us in Jesus. I wonder what way of praying would serve best for you to feel connected to God and open to Jesus' way of seeing the world.

I can't help but notice how Jesus drives the parable's lesson home. He's given us the widow as an image of persistence and determination. She is so passionate about the issue of justice that she intimidates the big powerful judge, who's afraid she'll give him a black eye. Jesus has also shown up the contrast between the judge and God. If the widow can get a response from a judge who has no fear of God and no respect for people, how much more can God's people count on God, who is gracious and merciful, compassionate and faithful! Really, the biggest question mark about everything lies with us. Will we be as persistent as the widow? Or will we lose heart? “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Jesus means: will he find us practicing our faith, even in the toughest times.

It could almost sound like Jesus was dumping everything in our laps. But I don't think so. Instead, I wonder if a very simple image can help. I rely on my phone for all sorts of things. It's where I keep my calendar, it's where I check my email, it's where I store all the pictures I take, and, of course, I use it for making phone calls. But it will only work for me when I plug it in regularly to charge it. The phone itself doesn't have power to do all I need it to do. The power

needs to come from somewhere else. And when we look at the range of problems around us—war, poverty, hunger, addiction, homelessness—the power required to deal with all those problems is definitely greater than our own personal supply. But when we're plugged in to Jesus' vision for the human family made whole, we can be energized to do our small part—and prayer, however you practice it, is how we stay plugged in. My friends, Jesus calls us—and helps us—to pray always and not lose heart. Thanks be to God. Amen.