

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This one is in my wheelhouse...because, after thirty years of advocacy for clients before the courts of this state, I have seen my share of judges. A boatload of them. All shapes, sizes, and...for sure...all types of temperaments as well.

I know all those people...which only means that, for our purposes this morning, the parable by Jesus of the widow and the unjust judge has some special meaning for me. Talk about anecdotal story-telling!

I do not have a gift for telling jokes. Some folks are natural for it, but not me...so there is only one that I know and remember. What do you call a lawyer with an IQ under 100? "Your Honor".

There is particular pleasure in telling that to some good, natured judges that I know, but they are few and far between. On very rare occasions, I have sued them on behalf of children that I have represented, or have replied to inquiries from the state judicial conference committee on allegations of judicial impropriety. But, more often, as an advocate you are left with the sinking feeling that the person in that black gown sitting up there has closed her ears, or made his mind up long before you get the chance to be heard. And is not that, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what any of us wants? A chance to be heard? To be listened to?

It seems that what passes today for (quote) conversation and discussion (unquote) is practiced on any number of talk shows on television: everybody screaming, at high volume, all at once...and rattling on so fast as to not even be discernable. I remember a television show years ago during which Bill O'Reilly maintained a particular position to the point that Whoopi Goldberg and Joy Behar, two of the show's hosts, walked off the set. Why did they do that?

They walked off the set because someone changed the rules. In other words, the world and culture of today does not value, let alone entertain the concept of substantive dialogue or meaningful discourse between people.

You or I no longer can expect the chance to be given the time to present a thoughtful, deliberative expression...no more that you or I can expect to be heard in the return. Now, it seems that you and I have to push...to propel ourselves...at whatever decibel level, at whatever speed, and with whatever repulsive vocabulary is necessary...not to communicate, mind you, but rather to just announce something. Anything. We hear people making noise so that they are noticed, because being noticed is all that seems to matter. Is not that really "the message" of the person dropping "f-bombs" every other word, or the car with the windows down and blasting the stereo, or even the motorcycle owner who cannot even pronounce the word "muffler"?

So...is that what is facing the widow in this parable?

Does she need to literally stomp her feet and bellow at the top of her lungs?

In her first-century, Judeo-centric world and life, she is completely powerless. Inconsequential. Some commentators on this scripture and other preachers focus on the justice angle of this parable...and it would seem reasonable because widows in the first-century have no rights. Any inheritance from her late husband would go to their eldest son or, if she had no sons, it would default to her husband's eldest brother. Not fair, but that was the way it was...in a culture that was not kind to women in general and widows in particular. So, she has little to no shot before the judge anyway because of the law of inheritance, and yet she goes anyway....with no real prayer...pun intended...of getting relief from the judge.

She may be the underdog and is a woman, but she is tough as nails. Jesus says she "kept coming to him." Kept coming, and kept coming, and kept coming. Apparently, we are supposed to bother God with our prayers until God finally listens to what we are saying. Is that what this parable is saying? On the surface, it seems that if we are persistent enough with our prayers, God will finally give us what we want if only to shut us up. Is that what this parable is saying?

We have to consider the context of this scripture. Jesus has been telling his disciples about the end of the age, in frightening language to them. But, in his gospel, Luke tells us what it means by directly explaining that this strange little story is about their "need to pray always and not to lose heart." Losing heart is a form of fear, which we can all relate to.

Often, fear and prayer go together. Now I am sure you have wondered too....does prayer change the mind of God? Does prayer change the mind of the person praying? Does it really do any good? There may be times when we do pray in the face of danger, illness, war, violence, concern for our children or parents. I am sure that people prayed non-stop in the World Trade Towers, and they pray when they are under fire in Iraq or Syria, when lives are endangered.

And yet, this parable seems to also suggest that there is a formula....like the Shinto worship in Japan, that is really quite easy. Clap twice, bow to the idol and then clap twice more. Why clap loudly?

To get the god's attention. Is that what this is about? Getting God's attention?

No.

In the day of Jesus, people prayed to their pagan gods by repetitiously heaping words upon words, performing rituals to get the god's attention. Some even slashed themselves so their blood would cry out. Jesus says that the Lord our God is not like that. God knows our needs even before we ask for help. We do not need to get the Lord our God's attention. Our God promises to hear us and help us and save us.

It is not a "cause and effect" thing. This parable is not a recipe...not saying that if you or I do this and that, then God will do whatever.

Instead, it is a story commending the persistence of the widow which is offered to encourage the disciples and each of us...to be diligent, and observant, and habitual in maintaining a relationship with

God. Just as with any relationship that is healthy, and growing, and sustainable through good and tough times with friends or family, constant communication is necessary. That mutual sharing and listening that each one of us treasures when we think about that particularly intimate and reliable friend who is so rare, so hard to find.

It does not matter who your relationship is with, you know that for it to be good, you have to work at it. A good marriage. A valued partnership. The mutual education of both teacher and pupil. All of them take real work. Real effort. Real dedication and commitment...to the process, as well as to each other.

Prayer is communication with God...and it takes many forms, in many venues, but we always need to recognize its necessity as well as its value. We do not need to use fancy phrases and convoluted prayer language. You do not talk to your best friend that way, and do not need to talk to God that way either..but instead, naturally, from the heart...and prayer will change us as we come closer to God.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, wrote in his journals, “One kind of person thinks and imagines that when he prays, the important thing..the thing he must concentrate on is that God should hear what he is praying for. And yet in the true, eternal sense it is just the reverse. The true relationship in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the praying person continues to pray until he or she is the one who hears, who knows, what God wills.”

Bring to God our specific, actual, everyday needs, and God becomes more real to us, nearer to us, and God's will for us becomes clearer....as God strengthens and we more deeply enjoy our communion within the eternal loving relationship of the Trinity of our one God, ever present in the Father and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit.

Amen.