

October 21, 2007  
Rev. Mark Forrester  
21st Sunday after Pentecost(c)

## **Unreasonable Faith**

Luke 18: 1-8

The playwright George Bernard Shaw observed that, *“reasonable people adapt themselves to the world; unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves; all progress, therefore, depends on unreasonable people.”*

Shaw’s wry little maxim sheds some light on today’s Gospel lesson about the relentless widow and the unjust judge: prayer is not for the easily discouraged, and those who pray must endure with a tenacity of spirit that persists until, and only until, justice is served.

The parable of the relentless widow, as presented in Luke’s Gospel, is a humorous story told within a larger context of end-time warnings.

In the previous chapter leading up to today’s lesson we have Jesus talking about the coming of the Son of Man, warning his disciples about the frenzied and chaotic times ahead, of how it would be like the days before the Flood and the judgment of Sodom.

Those of us who are sufficiently modern would wince in painful disbelief if we ever heard this kind of doomsday sermonizing coming from the lips of anyone else (say that of an east Tennessee AM radio preacher!). But...here we have our Lord refusing to moderate his words in order to soothe the easily-offended. Time is too short, life quickly passes, and nice, uncomplaining people seldom get heard. In fact, to remain silent in an unjust society is a luxury enjoyed at the expense of its victims. Jesus’ followers must do more. They must live-out an unreasonable faith(which is different in kind than that of an irrational faith). Knowing that a passionate prayer life helps keep us from losing heart, Jesus asked, *“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

During the closing years of South Africa’s Apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu called for all people of conscience to no longer tolerate the intolerable by saying, *“if the elephant continues to put his foot on the mouse’s tail and you remain neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”*

Although there is occasional need in an atomic age for neutrality and diplomacy on the political front, there are many more

occasions when moral progress can only surge ahead when positions are taken and advocacy is invoked. In fact, strong voices need to be raised against systemic and self-perpetuating forms of violence and injustice. One of the most blatant injustices of our time is that of domestic violence. For the last twenty years October has been Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Not unlike the persistent and fearless widow in today's Gospel, women and men are called, time-and-time-again, to join hands and voices against this shameful epidemic. The use of willful intimidation, assault, battery and rape by one intimate partner against another is staggering: one in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime; 1.3 million women are victims of assault every year; females who are between 20-24 years of age are at the greatest risk of intimate partner violence. But simple knowledge of this isn't sufficient. What we do, or fail to do, serves to either encourage women to take back their lives or, sadly, to give their lives over to those who brutalize them through a twisted psychology of self-hatred and self-blame. These victims are not benefiting from our neutrality.

About thirty years ago I was a junior in college, working a fairly lucrative part time job as a bellman at Opryland Hotel. I worked any shift, day or night, that had the busiest traffic of check-in's or check-out's. I often worked along side some of my closest friends. Early one Saturday, about 2 a.m., three of us had clocked out and were making our way through the ballroom parking lot to the employee parking lot. Off in the distance, under the amber glow of a lone street light, we suddenly sighted a woman being beaten by a man as she tried, with no success, to elude his punches. One friend took off for the security desk to summon help, while the two of us remaining ran to the scene and physically intervened. The man was a drunken lunatic who cursed and spit at us. He carried on like we were bullies out to take advantage of him! What's worse, his wife/girlfriend took his position and starting to attack us! She screamed more loudly at us than she had been screaming just a few minutes before.

The whole scene was totally surreal. When security showed up, she denied that she had been beaten (even though her lip was swollen). Much to my surprise, she warned everyone within shouting range to mind their own business and leave them alone.

I left that scene with a bad attitude. I left saying what millions of others must say all the time: if she wasn't willing to stand up for herself then she deserved what she got. What I failed to realize, until sometime later, was that this woman acted like she did because she

had internalized the violence that she repeatedly suffered. Maybe at one time early on in her life she had tried. But that time had obviously come and gone. The physical battering would eventually heal, but her spirit was broken beyond repair. The world to which she appealed had for too long been populated by ruthless and unmerciful judges. Unlike the persistent, resilient widow in today's Gospel, this woman, and countless others before and after her, had lost heart.

Certainly we must pray without ceasing when it comes to ending physical violence, when it comes to encouraging others not to lose heart.

It's worth noting that Jesus uses the example of the widow going public as a way of defining prayer. Prayer is mostly understood to be a private thing, or once a week a collective petition that we utter among friends in church. Seldom is prayer embraced as a form of activism. In fact, whenever people of faith take their prayers to the streets they are routinely mocked for "wearing their religion on their sleeve." At other times they are arrested, beaten or taken to jail.

Our faith and literature group has just finished reading Will Campbell's *Brother to a Dragonfly*, and we plan to visit Brother Will this coming Wednesday. This memoir is many things. It's a passionate story about two brothers who grew up before and during the civil rights movement in the deep south. It's also a plainspoken account of our nation's spiritual and moral struggle to overcome segregation when, quite often, public and private definitions of prayer clashed in the streets.

Brother Will recounts one scene in Albany, Georgia, in the early 1960's, when a group of fifty ministers, priests and rabbis from up north had come to the town square to voice their petitions and protests. They had been trained in the ways of nonviolent confrontation, and as they assembled a familiar scene unfolded: the Chief of Police bowed his head as the clergy said their opening prayer. He then asked them politely to disperse. They prayed again, he bowed his head again, and once more he asked them to go home and leave his fair city in peace. They stood their ground, refusing to disperse. One by one they were led away to jail as several hundred people on the front porch of the New Albany Hotel applauded. Will was there, and this is a bit of his commentary:

*Who were those several hundred who applauded? Were they Baptists under instruction in a new religion? No, just Baptists, and*

*Methodists and a few Presbyterians and Episcopalians. No Pentecostals, for they would have been out of place on the verandah of the New Albany Hotel. Just good churchgoers, good people.*

*They had heard the chief say, "Convert your own cities before you come here to convert us." And they had read the editor of the paper who said that people need to pray "not as the hypocrites on the street corner." And they cheered their chief as the strange looking group of clergy were marched through the alley and into the jail to be fingerprinted and booked.*

*...these men were sad. Some had been preaching three, five decades. Some were crying--old men crying. Not at all as if their time had come; more as if their time had gone by and all of the sudden they knew we had all waited too long to stand on the streets for simple justice.(pp. 166-67)*

We are still a nation that leads others away to sad and disreputable places, while otherwise good people applaud or silently acquiesce. We are still a nation in need of simple justice that is repeatedly denied to battered women, uninsured children, wounded veterans, the homeless and scores of others who, at one time in their lives, were foolish enough to believe in the American Dream. Many who suffer foreclosures because of unpaid medical expenses were, once, optimistic. They were honest, worked hard, saved and lived within their means. Sooner or later, they believed, their time would come. Instead, their time has passed them by.

A nation's greatness is measured by its goodness. A good nation is always a great nation, even when it lacks power. But a powerful nation that lacks goodness eventually squanders its greatness. Our nation has been both great and good, and we still have the capacity to reclaim its soul. If our prophetic calling is an extension of Amos's call to repentance, then our nation, like that of ancient Israel, is called to "*hate what is evil, love what is right, and see that justice prevails in the courts.*" (5:15) What kind of justice, pray tell, needs to prevail?

When we return to our Gospel lesson and look, again, at the persistent widow, what kind of justice was she after? It doesn't say, but the fact that this woman was identified as a widow gives us some clue as to her likely predicament. Her case probably concerned her deceased husband's estate. Jewish law at that time denied her an inheritance (it went to his surviving sons or brothers), but it did allow widows to live off of the estate. Unless, of course, someone was trying to cheat her out of basic food and shelter. The fact that she is

standing alone is a good indicator that none of the men in the family sided with her. Since she had nobody standing with her, neither was anybody there to hold her back. And the judge soon finds this out. By his own admission this judge has no fear of God nor any respect for anyone. God does not get to him, people do not get to him, but this woman eventually gets to him.

How does she do it? It's hard to get all of the nuance of this story in the English. Luke's original Greek version uses a boxing term to get the judges exasperation across. He says, *"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 with CONTINUED BLOWS UNDER THE EYE."*

To be successful at prayer one must, like the aggressive, hard-hitting widow, practice an unreasonable faith. This does not come easy. Who we are is often how we pray. Many of us were raised to be "nice Christians," believing that these two words are synonyms. Due to good breeding we are prone to offer nice, respectful prayers to a nice, loving God, and peacefully leave the results in the hands of the Almighty. And sometimes that's all we can do. But at other times, if we're living in difficult times, prayer must take on a certain edginess.

During my Jesus Freak days in the early to mid 1970's, I fell in with a Pentecostal church that saw prayer as a contact sport. Written prayers said in unison were anathema. Extemporaneous hour-long sermons gave rise, quite literally, to extemporaneous prayers of all sorts. People stood and prayed in tongues. Others literally ran to the alter and threw themselves at the mercy of God in anguished prayers of repentance. On Friday nights we would return to the church after our radio revival show broadcast from the Ryman auditorium (known as the Grand Ole Gospel Time), and we'd pray into the early morning hours--sweating and writhing with physical exhaustion like an army of prayer warriors storming the gates of hell. I look back on those years and with great affection see this phenomenon as a form of blue collar shamanism. Like a tribal shaman, our preacher would shout and dance and skip and clap and work himself into a lather. By the time he had successfully broken through into this ecstatic world of dreadful wonder, we were invited to follow and break through with him. Self-consciousness was not an option. Women would literally flip their wigs as they fell to the floor, while grown men would cry like babies in fetal positions. This was all a long time ago, but it at the time it truly felt like a time beyond time itself.

This is not a path that all are inclined to follow. But our Lord

does tell us to follow some path of prayer, however it suits us, and to pray and pray and pray as though your life, and the life of the world, depends on it. And the Good News is that our God, unlike the unjust judge, is not neutral to our prayerful pleas. Our God is a merciful, listening God who encourages and blesses an unreasonable faith for these unreasonable times. Amen.