

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost
16 October 2016

Scripture readings:

Jeremiah 31:27-34 Psalm 119:97-104 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 Luke 18:1-8

Here we have a parable. We have lost some things as language changes. You know what this parable used to be called: "The Parable of the Importunate Widow." That taught me what the word *importunate* meant. Look it up. It's akin to nagging. The one quality we know about this woman is she will not shut up, she will not go away, and, although she is not heard, she is not discouraged in her mission. She encounters a corrupt judge (Can you imagine that?) who doesn't love God and who doesn't respect people. We could ask who or what he does love and what he does respect. Might it be money or anything of the sort? We know this guy. We live with him. We live with him in our legal systems. We're not too far from Luzerne County, are we? Wasn't that where there was a connection with children and money? So some things haven't changed.

But we are being given this widow, this devalued woman who is our example for consideration this morning. If we just breezed through this lesson, we would say, "*Oh, she's an example of how we should pray, and we should all be praying all the time, and if we don't become monks and get up at four o'clock in the morning, we're not doing the job she did because we're not praying very well. She prays better than all the rest of us.*"

We all know that God answers prayer. She got better because I prayed. Yeah, well, somebody prayed harder and that woman over there died. Is this about prayer? Is this about praying to a God whose mind can be changed? Is this about an idiot God who needs to be informed by us? How's God supposed to know what we need if we don't tell her? This is the way we think when we're not thinking too profoundly about prayer, about diligence in prayer, about the power of prayer. What we mean usually when we talk about the power of prayer is getting God to do what we want God to do. Prayer works! Is that so?

Do you want to hear about the times that people pray and pray hard and long and more frequently than any of the rest of them put together and they don't get what they want. I guess those are the people God doesn't love so much as God loves me when my prayer is answered.

It's a confusing text, and we're sucked in with a lot of easy pieties when we look at things like this and say, "*Oh yes. Well, this is a nice instruction for us to be nice and go home and pray more. Goodbye.*" And God will do what we tell God to do if we pray right and long enough and often enough. I think that's hogwash! You know that there are other words I could use for that. *[laughter]*

But what is this text about? What is this parable trying to teach us? Well, instead of thinking that God has a mind that (a) doesn't know what we need and (b) can be changed by what we say or how often we say it... Let's pause a minute and see what it is she was asking the judge for, because she was dealing with a deaf judge who didn't love anybody - who didn't love God, who didn't love people - but she got what she wanted because she didn't give up. I think this parable is about justice, and in our day and age I think this parable is about social justice. I think this parable speaks to us today with the instruction that we must never shut up or go away in our search for justice. She's not asking only for herself but for others. She has taken on the powers and principalities which first of all devalue her. She's not only "just a woman," she's a widowed woman. That's really bad in that age and society. She has no value whatsoever. But she will not shut up and she will not go away and she's looking for justice. This is an instruction to us about how justice is accomplished in this world. Is it?

I heard Congressman John Lewis interviewed this week, probably on National Public Radio. I didn't pay too much attention, and I wish I had. I think he was talking about a book to be published in the near future about the end of the Civil Rights Movement. I scratched my head and thought, "*What do you mean, the end?*" Thank goodness for the enlightened interviewer who asked the same question, "*What do you mean, the end?*" Well, he was talking about the end of *that* phase, but the point was being made, and made very clearly, that that struggle

is never over. We know in our nation that as we have legislated for civil rights, for equal rights, for racial rights, for gender rights - we know that no matter how we have changed the laws, we have seen and we see written large in the public discourse today how those hatreds have been buried ever deeper in the hearts of people and have not been legislated out of our lives. So even though the laws have changed and life has changed to some degree or another for people, justice has been accomplished to some degree or another, it is not complete. Hatred has not evaporated, and the work continues.

Now the interesting thing about prayer is that we're given the impression that prayer is a conversation with God. Well, if you're having a conversation, isn't it important at least sometime to shut up and listen? Because if you are doing all the talking, that is not a conversation. It's a monologue. *[laughter]* And does this mean that God is praying to *us*? Now we are changeable. We, in fact, *need* to change. Our lives are determined by change: beginnings, middles and ends. Could it be that true religion has something to do with listening to God's prayer to you and to me? And what might that prayer be like?

I'm thrilled with the Jeremiah text today because it's an ancient pre-Christian text and it talks about Israel's understanding of God as a contractual one and a new idea about a relationship with God. The new idea is that *"It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand..."* What does that mean? Come on, Joey. Come on, Baby. *"...when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt - a covenant that they broke, even though I was their husband, says the Lord"* And what's a husband to a wife but a contractual relationship. A contractual relationship means there are at least two parties, each of which has something to offer the other. One wants something the other has; the other wants something the one has. And they agree to the interchange and they sign on the dotted line so that when one party fails in his or her responsibility, there is legal recourse. We understand what contractual relationships are. Otherwise we wouldn't watch Judge Judy in the afternoons. *[laughter]* She makes gobs of money on broken contracts and broken relationships - broken covenants - because when that all falls apart, then we need a judge, then we need the law.

Here in Jeremiah is the understanding that there is something more to our relationship with God than simply the law. The Reformers struggled with this idea about the role, the purpose, the use of the law. They felt that the law was useable for an example for civil government, so whether or not you put the Ten Commandments in the front of your courthouse, you can be sure, at least in this part of the world, that's going to be an underlying reality in legal contracts and how we deal with each other.

Another use of the law is a very honest use of the law which is one that says the law condemns, that if you read the law honestly, correctly and look at yourself when you read the law you will understand that you and I and every other person in the world is a lawbreaker. Oooo but I only tell little white lies. Well, they're lies. *[laughter]* I only took a quarter off the table. It's money.

So the Reformers understood that the law was useful in terms of condemning ourselves, helping us to evaluate ourselves as imperfect beings in need of mercy and in need of the love of God, in need of - this is for Carolyn Shelhorse who is a friend of mine and Sarah's sister - *grace*, the need of Divine Grace. And so Jeremiah, long before Jesus, sees that need for grace. *"It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, a covenant that they broke. Rather this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel, says the Lord. I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people."* They will be so much in love with me and I will be so much in love with them that we won't need a contract.

All those people who go to Judge Judy were that much in love at one point that they didn't need a contract, but, boy, when they fell out of love, did they need contracts! And does she understand the contract which has nothing to do with love. But *we* say God *is* love. And Jeremiah early on has an understanding that a really useful understanding of God and relationship with God may not be based on the law but on Divine Grace.

Now the law is useless. The Reformers understood that, but they discussed something called the third use of the law and that was the use of the law as a format for my justification. So that you take out a book and say, *"Well, I obeyed 1,2,4,6 and 9 and you only got 2 and 3 so I'm better than you are. I obeyed the law better and therefore God loves me better."* Got it? We're good at that one just as we're good at telling God what to do

when we pray. And the Reformers said Nix on that. Sorry. You can't justify yourself. The only way you can be justified is loved, grace-filled, forgiven by God. And that leads us into a completely different kind of relationship with the Almighty and a completely different kind of conversation where we stop dealing with God as an idiot who needs to be told what I need done, whom we think we can fool by hiding what we really know is inside of ourselves, covered over with pious language and prayer.

We need to believe that we can be changed if we would bother to listen to the prayers of our widowed God who never gives up praying to us and asking us, who frequently don't love God and often don't care for others, to bring justice into the world. Could it be, friends, that you and I in our religion are the judge in this parable? We judge others, we judge their religion, we judge the world, and we create the world in which others live and say, *"It's all right for you not to be justly treated."* Why? Do we need to go through the list? Because you're poor, because you're a woman, because you're black. Shall we go on? Because you're an immigrant, because you're gay, because you're...fill in the blank.

We make all of those judgments and God, as a widow - not as a plenipotentiary (try spelling that one) [laughter] God as a poor, worthless widow is applying to us, Judy, for justice. And that is an effort that never ends. We can get the laws changed, but to change the hearts of humans is a little bit trickier because it means we have to fall in love with those who oppose us, with those who are apparently our enemies, because otherwise we'll never have a conversation and never get to the business of exchanging ideas. It will only be who can punch and kick the hardest and who can scream the loudest.

The widow complains, cries, carries on quietly, consistently, faithfully to pray to us, to the judge for justice. And that is a full-time, everlasting job. Jesus said it himself: *"The poor you will always have with you."* He could have said, *"The job will never be done,"* There will always be work for justice that needs to be done. That's why I was so astounded at the radio interview when there was a sense that the Civil Rights Movement had come to an end. Well, maybe that part of it has, but the Christian part hasn't, and maybe the Christian part got on board late but that's no excuse for us not to continue.

So we have in the epistle lesson this extraordinary idea that our job is to proclaim the message - now get this - by being persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. We are encouraged to convince, to rebuke and to encourage with the utmost patience. Can you see Gandhi in India refusing to pick up a weapon of any sort and saying that, *"No, we must not harm our enemy, but we must speak the truth to the British empire"* which was simply, Get out! This is our land.

What are we going to do when the indigenous American people decide to do the same thing? Maybe it's time for us to love each other rather than to appeal to the law. You know that before the end of this century the white Caucasian population in this country will be less than the majority.

And so it was that at the convention of this diocese this year after we worked on all of the language in the constitution, all of the language in the by-laws to get things ironed out (an old organization gathers a lot of dust along the way), as I looked around again at the room filled with delegates from this diocese which includes the urban centers of Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, Wilkes-Barre, Scranton and Hazleton to see that in all of our churches there was not a single - or only one perhaps - delegate of color. The convention began with a presentation by two hired black people to speak to us about sharing power. Here we are meeting in pious assembly and at the end I felt it needed to be said and when I went to the mic I said, *"I may regret this, but here we are..."* You all know that I've written to the bishop twice. The third letter I didn't send. I'll deliver it to him today or tomorrow at the clergy retreat. I said, *"Is this the time, is this the place, are these the documents where we as a diocese need to commit ourselves to perhaps quotas or goals or commit ourselves to include at the decision power-sharing levels of the diocese people of color, primary language other than English, and the LGBT community."* The bishop's response was, *"That belongs in the mission statement."* Well, we could agree or disagree about that. You can be sure that at the clergy retreat today and tomorrow I'm going to find out where the mission statement is generated, how that happens, and what kind of input we can have into that.

In 1988 when the Lutheran Churches in the United States created a new organization and came to form what's now called the Lutheran Church in America, they did something which I felt at the time was not fair.

They established quotas for the committees of the church to include women, people of color, etc., and as the church moved on, I found I didn't have enough people to do all that, and I thought, "*Well, that's not fair. People ought to be moved on to these committees in terms of their abilities.*" But, you know what, if we hadn't done it, it wouldn't have happened. And the proof of that is one of my colleagues who is not only a priest, but who's a bus driver in Lehigh Valley (and I like him because my dad was a bus driver). He came to me after I spoke and said, "*You know, I'm a convention junkie. I go to the conventions of all the churches around here. You're right. Every other church is more representative at convention levels than this one.*" The point is it can be done. I think the point is we have to want to do it.

I think this gospel today tells us that we have to not shut up, that God continues to pray to us to have a diocese that looks more like us, because we have found in every last person who comes into this room, whoever he or she may be, an extraordinary loving relationship in which we see God present. As you and I know, this is an absolute fruit bowl of humanity. I'm not patting us on the back. I'm simply telling the good news of God's gift to us of each other. Simple! Simple!

And God has always asked us to accept what God has for us which is those closest to us, those in our neighborhoods, those we live and work with, those we love *and* those with whom we disagree, those we perceive as enemies, those who frighten us, even those who are afraid of *us*.

So this is an extraordinary complement of lessons today. In the Timothy text we hear this: "*As for you, always be sober...*(Well, you know I'm not a biblical literalist. *[laughter]*) *...endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist.*" That's your job. Now what's an evangelist? This is a dangerous word now because politics and positions in our country have hijacked this world and it means something political. But in scripture and over the door of the church where I grew up in Allentown - St. Stephen's Evangelical Lutheran Church - it meant something else. Any Germans here? If you lived in Germany you would know that there are two churches: *Katholisch und Evangelisch*. The division in Germany is you're either Catholic or Evangelical, meaning Lutheran. The word *evangelical* comes from Greek. The *angelical* part is the same root as angel, and angel in Greek is a messenger. It has nothing to do with wings unless you can fly to carry your message. An angel is a messenger. The *eu* in Greek always means good. So evangelical means a good message, good news.. It's very clear that our job is to do the work of a bearer of good news - not bad news - *good news!*

Carry out your ministry fully. Well, news isn't always good. The news from God is always good, believe it or not. You are God's creation. God loves you, God loves me, God loves everybody. And our job is always there for us to do.

One of the reasons I didn't send the third letter to the bishop - and I think it'll be better to hand it to him personally - is because I wrote it after the lesson was read about the Good Samaritan. You know the Samaritan puts the injured guy on his donkey and takes him to be cared for. In the letter I said to the bishop, "*It's time for us to get off our asses and use them as ambulances.*" *[laughter]* Well? Our work as ambulance drivers and seekers of justice never ends, and that's the joy in it! The Civil Rights Movement will never come to an end. The Christian movement will never come to an end. God's love will never come to an end. And God will never stop praying to you no matter whether or not you pray to God. God always comes to us filled with love and desire for us to fall back in love with God and to have a relationship which looks more like something written on the heart than in stone.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.