

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 29th SUNDAY -C-

Exodus 17: 8-13 Psalm 121 2 Timothy 3: 14- 4:2 Luke 18: 1-18

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Why would Jesus address this parable to disciples? Why would he think that disciples might grow “weary” praying? And why does Jesus encourage us to pray always? Does he know something we don’t? I suspect we have come to know what he knew, i.e. the temptation to give up on prayer. There are a lot of reasons to give up praying and to feel that God either does not care or that our prayer is deficient in some way and that is why God is not responding. We are not talking about the kind of prayer that asks for our own enhancement. We can deal with not getting rich or becoming president of the company, valedictorian at graduation, quarterback of our school football team, a date with “Mr. Wonderful,” having our children become honor students, successful brain surgeons or big shot lawyers. These issues are not at the heart of discipleship. We can get over these disappointments, live with more modest achievements, and learn to look elsewhere and use a different measuring rod when we measure our accomplishments.

What can weary us is the ongoing struggle of discipleship in a hostile world, worse still, an indifferent world, where disciples can feel like quaint museum pieces from another time. We aren’t considered a factor in forming values or making an impact on the consciousness of our world’s priorities. What we hold sacred, those around us don’t factor into their calculus of important issues. We seem to be looking in one direction while so many others are facing another. We struggle for peace, an end to racism and religious intolerance, an equitable distribution of the world’s resources, respect for life and the environment, vibrant faith communities, fair treatment of women in church and society, an end to violence—as we football fans here in the States would say--- what we want is “the whole nine yards.” We want to see what Jesus held sacred held sacred by all disciples. And we want to help the world become a better place.

However, we are tempted to wonder if we make a difference, a significant difference, after being on the scene for 2000 years. This past summer Cardinal Murphy O’Connor told English Catholics that Christianity had been vanquished in England. It’s not that there aren’t vibrant Christian communities. It’s just that in

the secular culture; Christianity is not seen as a significant player; not influential enough to make a difference or enter into the awareness of most citizens when they are making important decisions. Do we agree with the cardinal's assessment of our own land? Have we really helped the world grow into a better place? No wonder Jesus addresses this parable to his disciples. We need encouragement not to give up on ourselves and our church. We especially need encouragement not to give up on God. And so, we have this parable.

How shall we name it? In my New American Bible the parable is called, "The Corrupt Judge." How would you name it? Which character captures your attention, the judge of the widow? The parable is very Lucan with its familiar theme of prayer. Throughout this gospel, Luke has been stressing prayer. Jesus prays frequently and especially at key moments: in the wilderness, through the night before picking the Twelve and at the time of the transfiguration. Jesus also tells other parables besides this that focus on prayer. During his last moments of pain, just before his death on the cross he utters the prayer, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Jesus embodies his own advice; he prays always and does not become weary even in the face of the failure of his life's project.

This parable is unsettling. Widows and orphans were the most vulnerable in society and especially needy of protection under the law. The Hebrew scriptures uphold the task of judges to be defenders of the poor and those treated unjustly. If a judge is corrupt, then how shall a defenseless widow ever receive what she is justly due? Since Jesus is telling this parable, one would expect that he would draw from the best of his tradition and portray a judge in a better light. One would then be able to draw a parallel for how the divine comes to the aid of the neglected of the world, such as this widow. But what is one to do with a corrupt judge? Where else could this widow turn? What chance does she have for justice when the one who is supposed to protect her is corrupt and deaf to her pleas?

Is this judge being sincere when he says he will relent and give her what she wants because he is afraid, "lest she finally come and strike me?" He can't be that much of a wimp, can he? This parable certainly is not a neat parable about a fair judge who rushes in to defend the defenseless against wrong. The widow does not fit the mold either. She may be needy, but she is not timorous. As we say, she is in the judge's face with her constant complaint. She is keeping at it, right up to the judge's relenting statement. This judge doesn't come to recognition of what he

should do; what would be the just thing. Rather than yielding to noble motives, he just wants to get her out of his hair. He is hardly an exalted figure in a religious narrative.

One way this parable has been interpreted is with a focus on the judge. It is suggested that Jesus is drawing a comparison from a lesser to a greater: if even an unjust judge would relent, how much more would God respond to the cries of the “chosen ones?” The preacher needs to be very careful lest God sound like one who must be pestered and worn out by our constant prayer. Even with careful explanation, God can still sound distant and recalcitrant to our needs. The judge is the antithesis not a reflection of God. God is infinitely better disposed towards the poor and those unjustly treated than this callous judge. Our rescue may not come immediately, our cries for justice may seem to go unheard, but it is not because God is not disposed to us, or that our prayers don’t have enough faith about them, or that God is too big and busy with more important matters. Our prayers don’t have to be like drops of water that wear out a rock-like God by persistent dripping. Luke has said elsewhere that God wants to give good things to those who ask.

Many jump into this parable too quickly, making a hasty presumption. They presume the male judge somehow represents God. They advise us to keep asking and not to get discouraged if our prayers seem to go unanswered--- God will eventually give in. But this judge is a very negative figure. We are told he neither fears God nor respects any human being. There is another approach to the parable. Why can’t the widow be the reflection of the divine, the God-like figure? After all, she is the one being extolled. Barbara Reid (*Parables for Preachers*, the Liturgical Press, 2000) suggests the parable shows power in weakness. Victory comes, right is achieved, by the powerless widow. This widow reflects Jesus’ own seeming helplessness at his trial and crucifixion. We too must face implacable forces that are indifferent to right and deaf to the pleas of those who ask for justice, either for themselves or others. The feeling of powerlessness that disciples experience as they try to do God’s will for right can be very discouraging. The temptation is strong to throw up our hands in despair and withdraw from the field of struggle --- in the workplace or at school, the boardroom, union hall, athletic field, golf course or soup kitchen —wherever the disciple must keep speaking and acting as a child of God’s reign. Prayer emboldens and sustains our efforts and enables us to stay the course for right, “praying always without becoming weary.” Pray keeps us from being discouraged when we experience our weakness and impotency in the

face of the powers of the world.

While the parable uses the image of the persistent widow, the preacher may want to draw on another symbol of persistence from the events of these days. At this writing, the rescue workers are still at the World Trade Center digging and searching for survivors of the September 11th. attack. These workers are spending long days working twelve- and sixteen-hour shifts searching and hoping to find someone still alive. A fire chief was asked when they would call off the search for survivors. He said that he couldn't do it yet because even if he did his fire fighters wouldn't quit and would go right on digging and clawing their way through the rubble looking and hoping to find someone alive. What is it that sustains these workers? They want to thwart the forces of evil that took so much in such a short time. They may feel small and insignificant in the face of 6 stories of rubble, but they are persistent. The Spirit of life lives in them and keeps them searching, hoping against hope. The same Spirit of life sustains us when we reach out in prayer and keeps us persistent in our efforts as God's children.

A word about the first reading from Exodus. It seems to have been chosen for this Sunday because it alludes to perseverance in prayer. But it is a difficult reading for a preaching, after all, it has God on Israel's side as Joshua "mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword." It may have been a wise choice on the part of the NT writers to ignore this passage for it shows a God being "easily manipulated against one's enemies." (A quote from, "Workbook for Lectors and Gospel Readers") Whatever our religion, we do have a tendency to put God on our side and with our armies against "them" ...don't we?

Maybe we could preach about the need we have to overcome other real enemies, like racism, discouragement, alcoholism, etc. These and similar enemies are powerful, persistent and have been with us a long time. We often need to keep up the battle over a lifetime. This reading shows God with us against such recurring enemies, and often our help comes in the form of others who, as Aaron and Hur did for Moses, support our hands, "one on one side, and one on the other." You could use as an example the presence of so many 12-step programs where people stand alongside others to support them in their battles. Invite people to call to mind moments in their lives that were so difficult that they would never have gotten through had God not been with us through others who held supported us and held up our arms in our struggle.

JUSTICE NOTES:

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

In the light of today's parable about the widow, the following are quotes from **STRENGTHEN THE BONDS OF PEACE**, the bishops' pastoral reflection on women in the Church and society.

Today, throughout the world, women hold positions of exacting leadership, as heads of government, judges, research doctors, symphony conductors and business executives. They serve as presidents at Catholic colleges and universities and as administrators and faculty members at Catholic colleges and seminaries.An increasing number of Catholic theologians are women. Some women serve the diocesan churches as school superintendents and chancellors, as archivists and members of marriage tribunals. More and more women have responsible national positions in the Catholic Church.... One recent study shows that 85 percent of non-ordained ministerial positions in parishes are now held by women....

We are painfully aware that sexism, defined as 'unjust discrimination based on sex,' is still present in some members of the Church. We reject sexism and pledge renewed efforts to guard against it in church teaching and practices. We further reject extreme positions on women's issues which impede dialogue and divide the Church. We commit ourselves to make sure that our words and actions express our belief in the equality of all women and men....

The Church better fulfills its mission when the gifts of all its members are engaged as fully as possible. Women are essential in ministry both within the Church and to the world. The diversity of women's gifts and talents should be celebrated. Different voices, different experiences and perspectives and different methodologies help the Gospel. to be proclaimed and received with freshness....We urge pastors to recognize and to continue to call forth the distinct contributions that women can make to the Church and to the world. Diversity of gifts in the service of Christ is not to be feared or suppressed but recognized as a sign of the Church's vitality and ongoing renewal....

Still the face of the Church reveals the pain that many women experience. At times this pain results from the flawed behavior of human beings—clergy and lay—when we attempt to dominate each other. Women also experience pain because of persistent sexism. At times this sexism is unconscious, the result of inadequate reflection. A Church that is deepening its consciousness of itself, that is trying to project the image of Christ to the world. Will understand the need for ongoing, prayerful reflection in this area.