

“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:

We preachers need to be wary of today’s parable of the widow and the unjust judge, lest we convey a false image of God. (Remember the command, “Thou shall not have strange gods before me.”) Well, if we are not careful, we are liable to preach a “strange god” and even seem to make what we say sound legitimate or backed up by this parable.

The trap lies in our modern tendency to be too literal. By that I mean, we tend to miss the imaginative aspects of these parables and apply a strict formula to them in our interpretation. It goes something like this: the judge is God, and we are the widows. So, like the widow we need to pray incessantly if we want to get what we want from God. Keep at it, God will eventually give in...isn’t that what the parable seems to imply? This, or similar ways of interpreting parables, treats them as allegories—not parables. Look what such an interpretation does to our faith: it paints God as hard hearted and our constant prayer like water dripping on the stone heart of a reluctant God, hoping to eventually wear God down on our behalf. Remember too that the judge in the parable is unjust—making it even more dangerous to allegorize this parable, lest God take on the features of this judge in our hearers’ imaginations.

If God gets so misrepresented then we, who are praying earnestly and even desperately for something, are made to feel doubly alone, with no one on our side against the Almighty and seeming reluctant God. If this is what we convey, no matter how unintentionally, then we will have preached a “strange god” indeed! Certainly not the God of Jesus’ words and actions. This false image will only reinforce an old stereotype of a God so offended by our sin, that God would punish us severely were it not for Jesus, God’s beloved child who, by his faithfulness and sacrifice, stays God’s angry hand. This makes God sound schizophrenic—partially with us in Jesus but ill-disposed as our Creator--- with the Holy Spirit going back and forth between us humans and the two trying to tie up the loose ends.

Even if we didn’t have the citation telling us that this is a parable from Luke’s

gospel, we could easily guess its authorship. The parable has the signs of a Lucan tale for again we hear his often-repeated themes about the poor, women and prayer. Widows were an especially vulnerable group in biblical times and in the scriptures we often hear the reference to “widows and orphans”—two particularly vulnerable groups. A widow would be dependent on her sons or a close male relative to take care of her. She was especially vulnerable if the responsible males were indifferent to her welfare or worse, had defrauded her. In such situations a widow would have recourse to a judge who was supposed to protect the rights of widows and the poor. But the judge to whom our widow turns has no regard for her plight and “neither feared God nor respected any human being.” What chance would she have against a judge like this who disregards the basic commandments about God and neighbor? The cards are stacked against her, and things look pretty grim for her ever getting her due.

But this is no ordinary widow! She confronts the judge using the only things she has on her side—her voice and her persistence. What she wants is justice, but from a judge who is not in the least bit interested in giving it to her; the only recourse she would normally have had is not in the least bit interested in her just cause. But by her persistence she wears down the judge who finally gives in to her. Don’t you find it amusing to hear the judge’s fear that a widow is going to come and “strike” him? The original language suggests that he is afraid she will give him a black eye. I hear Jesus’ listeners, so often denied their own rights before the rich and powerful, chuckling as Jesus paints this picture of a “dangerous” widow who will give a good boxing to a corrupt male judge.

The widow’s plight calls to mind those who are deprived of justice in our own society. Elections are drawing near. Whose voices are going to be heard by both politicians and voters in November? Whose interests will be at the top of the list? Will the voices of the poor and powerless be outshouted by individuals and special interest groups who have more financial or voting power? It would be a rare election indeed if this didn’t happen. Most often the poor, minorities, immigrants, homeless, infirmed aged and very young are not first on the minds of those running for office or those casting votes. We can hear the widow’s voice in another way, for now she is speaking for those in our society who are not heard despite their just and desperate need. Will her voice be heard today by city planners deciding where to put a new power plant, city dump, petro-chemical plant, refinery? Who will influence municipal and federal governments when decisions are being made about

which homes will be destroyed to build a super highway? Picture the widow standing among those disenfranchised and hear her voice, “Render a just decision for [us] against [our] adversary.”

This is one of those “how-much-more parables.” Jesus paints a picture of a despicable judge who eventually gives in to the persistent demands of the widow. It is as if he is saying, “If this kind of a person eventually responds, how much more will God?” Why? Because God is not turned against us and will “secure the rights” of God’s chosen. Of course, our struggle lies in the fact that so much in our world is unjust, especially for the disenfranchised. We pray for things to be put right and even pray that we can help make them so. Yet often, conditions don’t improve, sometimes they even get worse. Doesn’t that make you want to despair of every seeing things righted? So, we are tempted to cease our works and quite our prayers. “What’s the use?”, we lament. Even when things improve a bit there still is an enormous mountain of wrongs to address—in our homes, church, community and world. We feel our efforts are so puny and so are tempted to withdraw back into our private world saying, “What difference can I make?”

Such feelings tempt us to quit our efforts at prayer and works on behalf of God’s reign. Jesus expresses how serious the issues are, how powerful the forces against us are and seems to worry about the effects on his disciples. He asks, “But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Not an idle or speculative question, but one that is based on the experiences of the church from its beginnings: disciples have hard work and prayer to do until the Lord returns and the wait, without immediate signs of “success,” can disillusion us and threaten our faith.

If we are looking for an image of the divine in this parable and don’t find it in the judge, is there another possibility? Here is another approach by the New Testament scholar Barbara Reid. (PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE, YEAR C. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000.) She suggests finding the God-like figure in the widow who persistently pursues injustice, denouncing it until justice is achieved. This interpretation is consistent with the New Testament message that power is found in weakness. A conclusion we would draw for ourselves then is that if this is the God in whose image we are made, then we too should tirelessly pursue justice even if it is against more powerful forces than we can muster.

I like the first reading's image for prayer. As powerful and exemplary a model of faith Moses was during hard times, nevertheless, as the battle against Amalek wears on, Moses' raised hands "grew tired." We can identify with that fatigue, we who find it hard to keep our hands raised in prayer as life tries to wear us down. Even Moses needed help. So, Aaron and Hur support his hands, "one on one side and one on the other, so his hands remained steady till sunset." We all need help in our struggles against evil forces and in our desire to stay faithful in hard times.

Look around at those who worship with us at this Eucharist. We see the elderly, even infirmed, here—still praying. We know of those who can't get out of bed to come to church, but we also know they are praying and staying faithful. They give strength and determination to our faltering prayer; they help keep our hands "raised." Perhaps someone notices us here at worship. We don't think of ourselves as great models of faith, but who knows what straggling soul at prayer with us is helped by seeing us here? We may be helping them keep their faltering and tired hands "raised" in hope and prayer.

QUOTABLE

Silence

The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to promote meditation, and so any sort of haste that hinders recollection must clearly be avoided. During the Liturgy of the Word, it is also appropriate to include brief periods of silence, accommodated to the gathered assembly, in which, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. It may be appropriate to observe such periods of silence, for example, before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, after the first and second reading, and lastly at the conclusion of the homily.

----#56, from the GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003.

JUSTICE NOTES

More than 15 million children die each year for lack of food and inexpensive vaccines—over 43, 000 children a day, or 30 each minute.... A tiny fraction of the

arms budget, a budget in which there is a scandalous waste, could save the children now by providing essential food and medicine.

—Mary Evelyn Jegen, SND (Quoted in “Peace Moments,” published by Pax Christi, USA, compiled by Marlene Bertke, OSB. Phone 814-453-4955).

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Robbie D. Locklear #0246186 (On death row since 5/14/96)
- Anthony J. Hipps #0185502 (5/22/96)
- Archie L. Billings #0471315 (6/5/96)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606