

October 21

Bread for the World Sunday

Bread for the Church pledge drive begins

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Luke 18:1-8

“Keep Praying!”

Fascinating neighbors lived near me when I was a child. The Lichtys, or actually the Lichtenbergers, though they were happy to let me call them Mr. and Mrs. Lichty. They lived next door, and even though they probably weren't that much different than the average retired couple, I found them fascinating. That's what any neighbor is to a small child: fascinating! Any home that is different than one's own is an entire new world to explore. A new set of ears that hasn't heard all a child's repetitive questions is a great opportunity for conversation. And, somebody new that has all kinds of life stories that haven't yet been heard is a great adventure.

So I loved to go over to the Lichtys' home. I'm sure I was a bit of a “Dennis the Menace” character to them. You see, they had not had any children, and their home was filled with elegant furnishings within the hushed sanctuary of their home. The only noise that interrupted their graciously appointed house was that of a lovely chiming clock singing out the quarter hours somewhere in the house. Their yard was carefully manicured weekly by a professional gardener named Mr. Sakuma. Bob Monahan knows who I'm talking about, and thus knows what a showplace the Lichtys had because of this man's amazing skill.

Very regularly, I would come crashing into this lovely scene with my dirty play clothes and inquisitive child's eye. My mother usually didn't know that I had escaped, since I saw no need to check with her before I left for the Lichtys place with my unbrushed hair and unwashed face. To my preschool and early primary aged mind, it seemed a very proper decision to visit the Lichtys, so why would I need to check with anyone?

Up to their back porch I would go. Now, their back porch had two doors, which can be a little confusing to a child. One door went to the kitchen area of their home, and the other door went to the living room. No matter, I would pound away unceasingly on one door, and then move to the second door and resume the unceasing pounding on that door too! When my knuckles became sore from the pounding, I would simply curl my hands into fists, and continue to pound away on the unanswered doors. You see, I wasn't awfully subtle with my knocking as a child. Someone had told me that Mr. Lichty was hard of hearing, so I knew I had to throw my entire childish strength into knocking on their door, or doors. And I did. I would just wail away on those doors until someone came to one of the doors saying, “Why Mary! I thought it was you!”

I remembered my relentless knocking on the neighbors' door when I pondered the parable of the widow in today's Gospel lesson. This widow knows that rascally judge is hiding somewhere in his house, and she's not going to let him ignore her. She sees him

in his judges' chambers at the city gate, and she refuses to leave the waiting area until he will grant her some time to hear her story. When she sees him on the streets, she doesn't let him slip away through the crowd until she has shouted for attention and given pursuit. She is everywhere, persistent, determined.

Why does she need to be this way? Can she not wait for her appointed time in court before this judge, and have her case be heard as anyone else can do? Is she not acting a bit like an unbalanced pest, rather than a sane and rational and reasonable member of society?

Let's review why Jesus needs to tell this parable. Luke writes, "The Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

Pray always and not lose heart? Does this mean the disciples were getting discouraged? Imagine that! Who doesn't get discouraged? We could speculate about the discouragement of the disciples, but I'd rather have you think about the things that discourage you. I would venture to guess that you don't have to look far for those things. Turn on the evening news, and you see all manner of inhumane treatment, either on the international level in senseless war, or in one to one violence in our neighborhoods and homes. You see examples of inhumane treatment toward the other members of God's good creation, either animal or environmental. But then turn off the news, and there is all the random trauma of disease that won't let go, or family members that refuse to be family to one another, or all the consequences of the choices you wish you hadn't made.

The insidious thing about discouragement is that it can cause one to give up, to lose heart, perhaps as the disciples of Jesus were starting to do. Why bother to do anything about homelessness when the problem is so vast? Why try to right wrongs when the power and the institutions of wrong are so deeply entrenched in our world? Why not just resign oneself to such atrocities, and keep one's own head low in the world's crossfire? And prayer? Well, you pray and you pray, and nothing seems to change. Why bother?

Why bother? I'll tell you why. Because God is filled with righteous rage over the things that cause injustice and pain. Because God is the one that has given us the vision of the Kingdom of God, the realm where sadness and crying and death and pain will be no more! The place where justice will flow down like a roaring waterfall at the height of spring runoff, and righteousness will be like the never-ending flow of the Columbia River! Jesus has been telling people about the Kingdom of God right before this parable, and one of the things he says is, "For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21).

The seeds of this kingdom, this realm of justice and life, have already been sown. What are we doing to nurture those seeds into bloom? I see a lot of those seeds of God's righteousness lying dormant. There are a lot of obstacles standing in the way of their growth. Pray to God that those obstacles will be removed! God is the one who holds the vision of a coming day of justice and goodness, and God has given us that vision.

At first glance with this parable, it may seem that we are to pray to God for the purpose of wearing down some kind of divine stubbornness within God. Perhaps God is the judge that doesn't want to hear the widow's cause, so we'd better pester God, is one thought.

But that is not right. The judge is not anywhere close to being like God. The judge is one that is happy to listen to rich and powerful people, people who might return his verdicts in their favor with favors toward him. He isn't all that concerned with righting wrongs, or helping the helpless. He's using his position for his own benefit. And quite frankly, this nameless little widow can't do a thing for him. He blows her off, and most likely blows off a lot of people like her, people who have no recourse with the system.

Have you seen such situations? Of course you have. The Black African population of South Africa was up against an immovable wall during the days of apartheid. No one would profit from taking their side...unless they bothered to hear God plead their case. What about the poor campesino farm workers of Central America? No one listens to them, and if any of them speak up, they "go missing in the night," or, like Archbishop Oscar Romero, they get shot in plain daylight, and yet no one officially sees who fired the gun. And what of the atrocities of Abu Ghraib? Who has rushed to the aid of the victims of those unauthorized tortures, and why has the pyramid of accountability for that remained so elusive?

The unrighteous judge of the parable can easily get away with ignoring justice for this widow. Except that he will eventually fall under the pressure of God's justice. He will. His unrighteousness will crumble away like dust in the wind before God's standards of righteousness. The question is, who will hold him accountable to God's standards?

Who will hold the powers of our world accountable to God's standards? Guess what Church. That is your role. You are the people of God, and you are called to hold the world accountable to God's standards of justice and righteousness. Just like that little widow who holds the course of justice through the tossing and turning of a judge who cares little or nothing to do the right thing, you and I are to hold our leaders' feet to the fire of God's causes. That widow knows that God's ways are unshakeable. She knows that the love and justice of God will prevail. She knows that the ways of that judge are corrupt and corrosive, and that God will not allow such things to stand forever. But she also knows that God will be with her, right by her side, as she pursues justice.

You see, prayer is not just you and I throwing our prayers up to God's closed door and hoping they'll somehow tip the scales of God's attention someday. Prayer is a two-way conversation with God. Listening for God is very different from listening to a person, so it may seem very strange at first. But when you hone your listening skills with persistent prayer, when you delve into the Scriptures, and talk with other believers about how God works, you sharpen your listening skills. And after a while, you begin to notice when your prayers before our Creator God lose their self-absorbed nature, and their self-consciousness, and they begin to shine with the vision held by God. Your prayers begin to share the conversation that God has initiated with humanity. Your conversation begins

to respond to the All-Knowing One on the other end of the conversation. And that level of understanding comes from not giving up, from being persistent with prayers, faltering and even comical at first, but strong and centered after persistent conversation. The one praying develops over time a broader sense of God's response and perspective.

Yes, there are a lot of unjust judge types in our world. And they will remain – why, they'll even thrive! – unless the challenge of God's justice comes their way. It is our task to pound away on those immovable doors of injustice with the strength and vision of God. Otherwise, those doors will never move.

I'd like to draw out this parable, and speculate that there were many eyes watching that widow. Maybe some laughed cynically, thinking she's wasting her time. But maybe others, maybe other neglected widows and some orphans that had been ripped off, maybe those watched her, and took heart. Then they came forward out of the shadows and the street corners, and also demanded justice. Why, that judge would have to crumble under the weight of all of their demands, and that judge would have to learn that he'd better just do the right thing in the beginning to avoid all that pressure. Think of what can happen when the body of Christ and its individual members speak up and speak out. Bread for the World letter writing is just one example of that type of thing.

So, like a child pounding excitedly on a door, or like a widow that refuses to let con artists rule the day, you are called to not give up. Keep attuned to God's ways through persistent prayer, and don't rest until the Kingdom of God in your very midst is allowed to come into full bloom.

I'm going to close with a prayer written by Janet Morley (All Desires Known, London: SPCK, 1992, page 24). Please pray with me.

*Righteous God,
you plead the cause
of the poor and unprotected.
Fill us with holy rage
when justice is delayed,
and give us the persistence
to require those rights that are denied;
for your name's sake, AMEN.*