

## The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 16, 2022

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

### Scripture Readings

*Genesis 32:22-30*

The same night [Jacob] arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

*2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5*

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

*Luke 18:1-8*

And [Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

## Sermon

Our text this morning is taken from our Gospel reading this morning, the parable that is usually called “the persistent widow,” the widow who keeps going to court for justice in spite of the unrighteous judge there who refuses her plea, until he finally gives in to her cause.

This parable is a typical underdog story: someone with a good cause went up against the established figure of power and, after a long time of struggle and discouragement, finally came out on top. Underdog stories are always popular and ultimately heartwarming tales, aren't they? Think of familiar fairy tales like Cinderella, or some of the many examples we see in film, like “The Miracle Worker” about Helen Keller, or any of the Rocky movies, or more recently, “The Blind Side.”

We know there's a great deal of injustice in this world, and we love to see it put right every so often. Isn't that the story of this parable? A widow, one of the most defenseless and vulnerable people in her society is under attack in some way and tries to get some justice from the local judge. Unfortunately for her, her only legal recourse turns out to be an unjust judge, a representative of justice who will not give her justice. Still, she is persistent, she keeps up her struggle under adversity and setbacks, and in the end her cause is vindicated when the judge relents and gives her the justice she was seeking. This could be a fine moral lesson for all of us, and possibly even a story of a changed heart, depending on how generous a view you want to take on the judge's decision to relent.

There's something not quite right about that take on this parable, though. The judge clearly does not have a change of heart. He's a corrupt scoundrel from beginning to end; even his “good deed” in doing his job and giving the widow justice was only done out of his own self-interest, wanting to be left alone and not pestered any more. As for the widow, her story isn't all that heartwarming either. No husband, apparently no protector or friends in the community to help her in court – we don't know whether she had any hope of success in her continual coming to court to bug the judge. Since we know how the parable ends, we skip straight to the happy resolution in our minds and don't consider the long, hard process the widow had to go through. Maybe she did it out of habit after a while, unthinkingly, or simply because, what else could she do? Why did she have any reason to think that this corrupt judge, who cared nothing about what anyone else thought of him, man or God, that this judge would ever relent? She could have even made things worse for herself if the judge decided to deal with his annoyance by punishing her instead of her enemy.

So let's look a little closer. What would this situation be like today, or something similar to it? There are certainly still plenty of people in our society who struggle daily, who have no friends or protectors. Perhaps a single mother is a good analogy: she has a couple of kids, has to hold down a job, or two jobs, or three jobs, to try and make ends meet, while also trying to be mother and sole parent at the same time. Every day is a grind – there is little relief from the weariness, the physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion. There's always too much to do and not enough time to do it in, but it still has to be done. And if a problem like this comes up, a legal problem, what then? Where's the time, energy, and money to even begin to deal with a problem like that?

And the judge, what about him? There are no doubt corrupt and uncaring judges still among us today as well. There are endless stories of the problems and failings of the legal system. But what captures for us this sense of authority without oversight, wealth and power and influence, the ability to function in society as a person who neither “fears God nor respects man”? Unfortunately, there are too many options for this image as well. A corrupt judge, sure. Or a corporate executive, a rich CEO who makes millions of dollars each year in his business, caring for nothing but profits? Perhaps. Or a politician, a Washington insider who sells out his constituency to the lobbying of special interest groups in return for his lifestyle of privilege and luxury? A Hollywood celebrity who flouts the law because of their money and fame. There is no shortage of people who are accustomed to having wealth and power, to getting what they want, when they want it, and doing what's necessary to keep it that way.

Nothing has changed much over the past two thousand years in this respect – power corrupts, and the powerless are brushed aside. But a parable is always meant to teach us something. What is it here? Sometimes the point of a parable can be difficult to see, but this one is a little easier to figure out, because we are given the purpose Jesus had in mind when he told and explained this one. He says it's so that we will always pray and not lose heart. We are evidently the widow here, the continual petitioner. We should continue our prayers and not give up, but rather be secure in our faith. But what about the judge we're approaching? Who is that? Well, we're talking about prayer, so presumably the judge in this parable is God. So, the unjust, corrupt judge is God?

No, God is not like the judge in this parable. He the just and perfect judge, not an unjust and corrupt one. Even better than that, He has told us that He is like a father to us; not a distant and impartial authority figure, but a loving one who is on our side. But what does that really mean to us, in practice, deep down? Is that how we treat Him? Do we come to Him like children to a loving father, or do we come to him like strangers to a corrupt judge?

Too often the latter is true, even if we don't admit it. In our prayers to God, we feel like we have to try to convince, beg, bargain, and plead with Him to get what we want. We're looking for the right formula, the right way to approach Him, in order for Him to grant us all our wishes. We treat God like He is this evil judge of the parable who is withholding justice from us, still wondering why He doesn't answer our prayers. If you're in the hospital, a well-meaning Christian friend might urge you to "pray harder" for your health to be restored. Like Elijah with the prophets of Baal, we think we have to shout louder! Get God's attention! Wake Him up, so He'll hear our cries for help, listen to us, and come deliver us!

When we feel like we're not getting the answer we want, we become discouraged after a while. Our initial sense of enthusiasm and expectation in our prayers wears off when we think they're going unanswered, day after day, month after month, even year after year. Eventually, though we continue in some form of prayer, the words are there but the confidence is not. "Maybe," we think, "Maybe I'll eventually wear God down, until He finally gives in to me. But in the meantime, I won't hold my breath." When it seems our prayers are unanswered, the temptation to hopelessness and even despair hovers all too closely to us.

That's not what God is like, though. He is a good and loving God, as He has told us. We don't have to yell loud enough to get His attention; we can whisper in His ear. We don't have to wake Him up; He's always with us. We don't have to wear Him down by continually asking Him for things, over and over again; He has already given us so many more blessings than we realize. Jesus' point with this parable is that if even a corrupt judge like the one in the parable will eventually relent out of his own self-interest and grudgingly do justice, how much more will God do justice for His people, the people that He loves and never leaves?

He invites us to come to Him prayer with all things; not like hesitant or hopeless strangers, but like His beloved children who can expect Him to give us what we need. Our Savior taught us how to pray, and even gave us a prayer for us to use. It starts out, "Our Father, who art in heaven." That's our God – the Father we have in heaven, not a stern judge, whether good or bad. It is through our Savior Jesus Christ that we have become children of God – before, we were indeed facing a judge, but through our baptism into Christ we have become God's children. That is why Jesus taught us to pray to our heavenly Father. If we did have to face God as if He were our judge, we would all, each and every one of us, be declared guilty. But in his crucifixion, Jesus took all the punishment that we would have had to bear onto himself, for our sake, and in his resurrection he calls us to faith in him. He died on the cross like a convicted criminal so that we can enter into eternal life as children of God.

So let us continue praying to our God and Father as He has told us we should, but let us always remember that He is our Father and not a harsh or uncaring judge to be afraid of. Just as we read in 1 John 5, "This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according

to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him." If even a wicked judge will eventually give justice to one who asks him, how much better will be the response of our loving Father in heaven? So therefore pray always and do not lose heart, pray to our loving Father, secure and confident in our faith in His son Jesus Christ.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be Thy name,  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done on earth  
as it is in heaven;  
give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For Thine is the kingdom  
and the power and the glory  
forever and ever. Amen.**

**P:** O Lord, almighty and everlasting God, You have commanded us to pray and have promised to hear us. Mercifully grant that Your Holy Spirit may direct and govern our hearts in all things that we may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of Your name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

**C: Amen.**

**P:** Let us bless the Lord!

**C: Thanks be to God!**

**P:** The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

**C: Amen.**