

The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa

Sermon for October 21, 2007

Genesis 32:3-8, 22-30

Psalm 121

Luke 18:1-8a

Gracious God, help me to preach in a way that seeks not my glory but yours, not the growth of this Church but the spread of your kingdom. Help to preach in a way that honors and respects those who will suffer and die today for your Gospel. Help me to preach in a way that is good news to the poor, the weak, the orphaned, the vulnerable, and the widowed.

Do you ever wonder where words come from? The history of words and languages is fascinating. The study of words reveals that some words that we use today are merely years old, while some words we use date back thousands of years. There are some words that exist in our language and our culture that do not exist in other languages. There are concepts that we attach words to that do not exist in other languages and cultures.

When we understand some of that history, it deepens our understanding of the stories, and the books that contain these words. This is true of all literature, and it is most certainly true of scripture.

In our reading from Genesis this weekend we are told that the name Israel means “one who has wrestled with God”. Israel the man, and Israel the people are identified as those who have wrestled with God. The faith of the people of Israel, and indeed the person of Jacob/Israel we claim to be our ancestors in the faith. Thus, the tradition of wrestling with God continues in our life as well. We who believe continue to wrestle with God in our life and in the world as God struggles with us to help us become the people God has created us to be, as God struggles to make this the world God created it to be.

Another word that caught my eye today was “widow“. I discovered this week “widow” has its roots in the Hebrew concept of being “mute”. Thus, a widow is one who is voiceless. A widow is voiceless because in patriarchal societies then and now, a woman’s voice came only through her husband. Once her husband died, the woman “lost“ her social and economic voice.

The image of the voiceless widow certainly deepens our understanding of the parable we heard today from Luke’s Gospel. In the parable, this voiceless one demands justice from the one whose word is law. Jesus tells us nothing of the circumstance behind her demand. Maybe she was demanding that she be treated as equal to a man. Maybe she wanted economic justice. We are not told the circumstance, but are told that she is wearing the judge out, she is shaming him. In fact the translation is that she is “blackening his eye“ she is causing him to lose face. Can’t you picture her there at his side every time he turns around. There in the court room, there when he breaks for lunch, there when he heads home for the evening. The voiceless one will not go away, and she will not keep quiet. Can’t you picture him offering her, a patronizing word, a little bit here and there in hopes that she will be satisfied and go away? Can you hear him making excuses as why he won’t give her what she demands: “Its just the wrong time.” “Can’t you be patient with me?” “Don’t you appreciate how much I have already done?” The judge has perhaps even tried to buy the widows silence with some crumbs of charity. But, she will not be silenced. The voiceless one continues to cry for justice.

Finally, he realizes that the only way for him to save face is to give in. This pestering widow has made

him the laughing stock of the court. This powerful judge cannot silence a widow. The only way for him to save his reputation is to decree for her the justice she demands.

It is clear that Jesus does not want us to equate the unjust judge with God. If even the unjust judge will decree justice for the voiceless widow, surely our God of Justice will decree justice for those who cry out in prayer. This theme is certainly central to the parable. I wonder though, if perhaps we might see God in the other person in the parable. Perhaps we can find the presence of God in the widow. In the scripture, God often reveals Godself in the strangest places. In a burning bush, in a gentle wind, in a baby born in a manger. God's voice speaks through the most surprising of people. Prophets, kings, queens, shepherds as well as those who are among the least, the lost and the lonely. Is it really any surprise that God might be revealed in the voice of a widow. Might the voice of God be found in the widow crying for justice.

Might God speak in our day through those who are voiceless?

Think of all the voiceless ones in our day, who cry for justice. The poor in the world who cry for clean water. The sick in the world who cry for medicine. The victims of war who cry for peace. Desperate people who cry out for a reason to hope. The unemployed who cry out for meaningful work and a just wage. The outcasts who cry for the right to be welcomed. Those who suffer from prejudice who cry to be treated with respect. The young who cry for a future. Creation that cries to be cared for.

Perhaps, we can hear in these voices the voice of God.

If these voiceless ones are the voice of God then perhaps there are times when we find ourselves in the place of the unjust judge? Perhaps we are there as individuals, or perhaps we are there as a society, or a church, or as a nation. Now, to say that we do not fear God and have no respect for people would not be fair--even on the worst of our days. But, on the other hand, I have to admit that there are times when I try not to hear the cries of the widows, the poor, the orphans, the weak, and the most vulnerable. Often I, like the judge try to silence those who cry for justice with a few crumbs of charity. Often I plead with them to be more patient, I give my litany of reasons why a truly just world is not possible at this time. I plead with them to bear their sufferings a little bit longer, until justice is more convenient. Sometimes I plead with them to be more understanding, a bit less intense, a little less angry, and certainly less political. Sometimes, I have to admit, I wish that those who continually cry for justice would just be quiet. I wish they would leave me alone. I grow tired of their persevering, relentless plea.

Perhaps, if I were to remember that these cries for justice might be the voice of God, I might be more inclined to listen. If I remember that God is speaking through the cries of those who are poor, weak, orphaned, vulnerable and widowed, maybe, like the unjust judge, might relent and I might work for a world in which they receive the justice they deserve.

The widow wrestles with the judge. He finally relented and granted her justice. By calling him to act justly, the widow was inviting him to live a more blessed life. In Genesis, the man wrestled with Jacob. Jacob's life was never the same. His hip was out of joint. His name was changed, and he was blessed. May we recognize God in the cries of those seeking justice. May we feel the presence of God in those who demand justice. May we allow them to change our hearts, and in changing our hearts may we thirst for the justice of God. And when we thirst for justice for the voiceless ones on God, may we be blessed.