

October 20, 2019

19C Pentecost: Proper 24

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Genesis 32:22-31 Jacob wrestles with God to get a blessing.

2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5 Don't give up when times are hard.

Luke 18:1-8 Jesus wanted to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus told the story of the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow to illustrate our need for persistence in prayer. The woman would not give up from pleading for justice.

I understand the feelings of the persistent widow; the feeling that nobody was listening to her. In the early 1970s I felt very frustrated with my engineering job. After the hard work of college, I thought I had made a bad choice in electrical engineering. I decided on a new start (at age 24) to open a branch of the family RV business, about 60 miles away. Over that first summer I sold 17 travel trailers – and I cheered my success. As winter arrived, gas shortages began. Odd / even rationing began at gas stations across the country; lines were four blocks long. Some stations shut down, having no gas. In the midst of that I was applying to the small business administration for a small loan to expand my business. They would not meet with me, they would not even talk to me on the phone. The person answering phones there said there would be no more RVs, no more camping, and there would be no money for me – period.

Then, the bank I worked with for financing of the trailers in stock sent word that they would no longer floor plan travel trailers. That ended my career in the RV business. I looked to find work, and there was no work. I saw news segments on TV of engineers pumping gas “out there” in California. I had a degree in electrical engineering, experience as a program manager, but only found work as a night watchman at an oil tank farm. I had lots of time to think and to ask God why this was happening to me. I felt like the SBA and bank were the unjust judges in my life. Like the persistent widow, I felt like nobody was listening.

Years later I learned about prayer being the training ground for a stronger faith. By ‘faith’ I do not mean faith that there is a god, but faith that God wants to be in relationship with me; that God wants to be part of my life. Robert Foster (Celebration of Discipline) says that to pray is to change. He says, “Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ.”

Marjorie Thompson in her book “Soul Feast” writes, “Prayer is a participation in willing God’s will.”

In the story of the persistent widow, Jesus was illustrating through contrast, and not through comparison. **God is not** like the dishonest judge, and **we are not** like the nagging woman. The judge cared about nobody; but God loves us. The widow demanded the judge's ear; but we don't demand; we pray out of our humility before God.

In the parable, the judge changes his mind. In prayer, it is not about us persisting until God changes His mind. We pray to be in dialog with God, learning and building our understanding of the heart of God. Through a consistent attitude of prayer, we are changed; we think differently, we learn that there is such a thing as divine timing, we learn the spiritual value of patience to see God's timing unfold, and we grow in humility to see that what we want - might not be what we need.

2 Timothy 4:2, "... be persistent, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable."

The aim of persistent prayer is not for us to wear God down, but to wear down the unjust judge inside ourselves, so that in us, whatever is wrong can be made right by God's grace.

My story of being a night watchman led to eventually learning about the unjust judge inside me. That story is about MY drive for success. The RV job failure led me back into engineering. Engineering brought me to California, and eventually paid my way through seminary, which brought me here. I tried hard to go my own way, and I am convinced NOW that God pulled me back on track. The unjust judge in me was not listening to God. I should tell you that my daughters think my time as a night watchman is one of the coolest jobs I ever had!

When I see this parable come up in our reading cycle, I smile because it reminds me about my own learning on what prayer is about: not to wear God down, but to learn more and more about the heart of God.

Amen.