

Sermon Proper 24 C 2016

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Psalms 119:97-104

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

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Prophecy is not an easy concept. Prophets arise, but how are we to know if their message is true? This morning, we conclude our readings from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah arose when the people of Israel were being led into exile by the Babylonians. Most of those known as prophets at the time predicted a short exile. They looked to Egypt as a source of redemption, hoping that the Egyptians would conquer the Babylonians. Alas, this was not to be. Jeremiah was a prophet of a different stripe. Jeremiah not only foretold the exile at the hands of the Babylonians but he had more bad news to share. That was the news, the prophecy, we heard last week. The Hebrew people weren't to look for a quick return home. Instead they were to settle down in exile. There they were to establish homes, marry, raise families. They were to pray for the stability of the communities in which they resided. Because in their community's stability was the well-being of the Hebrew people. This was a blasphemous prophecy. Yet, warranted because despite their exile, the Israelites had not repented. They failed to acknowledge their failures and they continued to turn away from God.

Yet, God was and is always merciful. As the Book of Jeremiah comes to an end, we learn of Jeremiah's final vision, that Israel will be restored. They will return home and rebuild and repopulate Israel. God is merciful and a new covenant will be written on the hearts of God's beloved people.

Recognizing true prophecy is not easy or clear. In our day, we hear of many who say they are speaking words of prophecy, but it is not clear that they are. The journey of faith has never been an easy journey. Faith requires coming to grips with prophecy and with scripture as well.

Interpreting prophecy is one issue, interpreting scripture is another altogether. We mustn't only be familiar with scripture, we must be able to comprehend and interpret.

Our connections to scripture, to “God’s word” for many of us came as it did for Timothy, as a life-long process. As Paul’s letters to Timothy attest, he came to faith by the teaching of his grandmother and mother. This was affirmed in this morning’s lesson from 2 Timothy: “How from childhood you have known the sacred writings.” Paul goes on to say, “All writing is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Scripture is inspired by God as Paul stated. Yet, as Episcopalians we do not believe that scripture is inerrant or unchanging. Jesus said that he had more to reveal to the world and that when the Spirit of Truth (the Holy Spirit) came, we would be led into all truth. God’s relationship with the beloved creation is ongoing and revelatory. Scripture is the reservoir of our faith. As we study scripture, we learn something of the divine initiative and then we reflect on how God may be speaking to us in our day.

Which takes us to Luke’s lesson this morning. Short, sweet, and to the point, or is it? This continues the large portion of material that is unique to Luke’s gospel. Luke gathered these unique stories of Jesus, these particular parables and assembled them into a large unit. This morning’s lesson begins with Luke’s introducing why Jesus told this story. “Jesus told his disciples this parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” But the story doesn’t exactly match Luke’s opening line if we dig deeper.

Surface readers of scripture look at the plain meaning. And that is fine, but looking at plain meaning may be difficult to translate for our day. And that is always the task at hand. We must study the scripture asking what it meant in Jesus’ day. Then we must ask what it might be saying to us today.

That is precisely where Luke’s parable runs amok. A story that seeks to encourage our always praying and not losing heart. Let’s see.

Jesus presented a straightforward story of two people. We begin with the first character, the judge. “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.” Ok, so this is the bad guy, certainly. This initially sounds like two terrible descriptors for someone in the role of judge. And before him comes a certain widow. Ah, our hearts are open. Widow vs. dishonest judge. Good vs. evil. We like clear cut characters. But life is seldom so clear. Look at any of our lives for example. If we dig deep enough, I suspect we are all a mixed collection.

Let's take a look at the widow. We don't know much about her so we might be inclined to put a generic filter of widowhood on her. Biblically, we think of widows as impoverished, at risk, vulnerable. But this widow doesn't seem to fit the bill. She doesn't seem vulnerable or at risk. She is pressing a case. She isn't begging for support. She is presenting herself day after day in the courts. Finances don't seem to be a problem. Widows as we know come from many backgrounds; each with their own story. They have experienced tragedy in their lives but their situations are as varied as there are widows. This widow is pressing her case against an opponent who is unknown to us.

The word that's translated as justice isn't actually the Greek word for justice. It is the Greek word for "avenged." Our translation has softened her actions considerably. Justice vs. vengeance, "vengeance is mine says the Lord." That quote comes to mind, yet much of what passes for justice in society today may be nothing more than vengeance. Our prisons are filled with those who receive society's justice doled out to those struggling with drug addiction for example. To many, this system looks more like vengeance than any form of justice. Justice and vengeance may be two sides of a coin. Depending upon your perspective, your understanding may be of one over the other.

My experience. By using the term justice, this suggests that her aims are just. We are all for justice. We clamor for it. But in my experience with TEC, justice can be played like a trump card. In the midst of debate and consideration at General Convention, if someone says the issue is a matter of justice, that can tend to shut down further discussion. One has to then ask, justice for whom? Debate can become complicated and conflicted quickly and appeals to justice may deaden further reflection, as if, whatever the issue, it was a no-brainer.

This widow is a wily one. She won't just "wear out" the judge. She will "give him a black eye." Literal or metaphorical, we get the picture of a strong widow. Nothing meek or dependent here. Amy Jill Levine suggests a Leona Helmsley type perhaps, suing for her hotel empire. Or others who use the courts to such effect.

So, let's go back to the first character, the judge. Or as Luke labels him, "the unjust judge." Yet, the judge seems to be beholden to no one, not even God. The judge might be seen as independent minded, not in anyone's pocket. A strict interpreter of the law (a strict constructionist) perhaps, as some suggest as somehow being ideal. A judge who merely judges, isn't beholden to others, and

doesn't legislate. Such a judge might be able to render opinions without caring about the parties involved. Would that be a bad thing?

Why did the judge relent? The phrase, "wear me out" is also "causing me labor" or "giving me work". "Wear me out" is a boxing term. Better phrasing might be "beat me up" or "strike me in the face" or "blacken his eye."

So in the end a widow continually assails a certain judge and eventually gets him to grant justice/vengeance against her opponent.

So we are left with two complicated characters, both with features that are not exemplary. The parable offers no easy answers, no plain reading. Perhaps that is a good thing. Perhaps we should stay with this parable, to let it sit with us. To think about how justice and vengeance are so closely intertwined. Complex problems such as we face in society today don't tend to have easy or facile solutions. They are complicated just as these characters are complicated. Complicated like this enigmatic parable.

Following the parable, Luke picks up again. Luke's editorializing at the end. Luke wants us to understand this parable is about prayer and our necessity to pray always and not be discouraged. This conclusion is not easily extrapolated from the parable. Not so plain and not so clear.

Perhaps Jesus is calling us to look at our motives in life and in prayer. Encouraging us to pray continually. In our prayer, we maintain an ongoing dialogue/conversation with God. In that conversation, we can bring to God all of our concerns and the concerns of the world. But prayer is a dialogue and in that dialogue we may just learn of God's hopes for us. God's call for us to intervene, to assist, to be an agent for change. Calling us to be an agent of love in action in our world with the characters in our lives as imperfect as they are. Maybe calling us to look carefully at our motives in prayer. Perhaps we too may be trying to wear God out in prayer. Some of the things I am praying for have been on my prayer list as long as I can remember and God certainly seems to be slow to respond.

I wish I had Luke's confidence that God would grant justice and quickly. But my quickly and God's quickly must represent different understandings of time. (?example from Synthesis of beating fists on a door and waiting for change.)

Living in our environment today, we, realize that prayer is called for and perhaps holds the only real solutions to the situations we face. So we pray for wisdom and insight, for courage and hope, for clarity and empowerment. As we continue to live this faith in our lives, we perhaps must follow Luke's lead, and do

nothing less than pray. Or to quote a Nobel prize winner, Bob Dylan, and put it another way, to keep “knock, knock, knockin’ on heaven’s door.”