

The Widow or the Judge?

Here are some statistics from Bread for the World that always stop me in my tracks when I allow myself to really consider what they mean. More than 850 million people in the world go hungry every day. In developing countries nearly 11 million children die every year from preventable and treatable causes. Sixty percent of these deaths are from hunger and malnutrition. Here in the United States, the world's richest country, 12.4 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet. That means one in ten households in the U.S. are living with hunger or are at risk of hunger. Here in Washington State, in the biennium from 2003 – 2005, 11.2% of households suffered from “food insecurity,” a condition in which people lack basic food intake to provide them with the energy and nutrients for fully productive lives. As a subset of that group, 3.9% of households experienced hunger as well as malnutrition. Think about that for a moment: almost 4% of families here in Washington State going to bed hungry on a regular basis.

Of course, there is also good news from Bread for the World. The United Nations Development Program estimates that the basic health and nutrition needs of the world's poorest people could be met for an additional \$13 billion a year. If \$13 billion sounds like a lot of money to you, consider that animal lovers in the United States and Europe spend more than that on pet food each year. If \$13 billion sounds like a lot to you, consider that the U.S. federal budget this year is approximately \$2.77 *trillion*. In fact, the budget of the United States federal government is so huge, they can even afford to give five and a half *million* dollars to an obscure little Baptist church in Lynnwood, Washington. So the problem isn't that there isn't enough money around to address the issue of world hunger. The resources exist. Food surpluses exist. Transportation solutions exist. What doesn't seem to exist is the institutional and collective will to get the job done.

Most participating churches observed Bread for the World Sunday this year on October 21st, the Sunday most of us were at Cascade Meadows. And for a focus scripture, the Gospel for that day's lectionary was chosen, the story we just heard about the persistent widow and the unrighteous judge. At first glance, it may seem like an incongruous choice. What does a story about the importance of persistent prayer have to do with world hunger? Are the folks at Bread for the World suggesting that this problem would be solved if we all just prayed a little harder? Do we need to petition God just a little more for a miraculous solution to world hunger?

The answer to that last question is pretty clearly, “No.” Jesus tells the disciples in no uncertain terms that God is not like the unjust judge. In this story, Jesus says, “will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” The Gospels are full of Jesus' assurances that our Heavenly Father will provide for us, is eager to provide for us. Matthew and Luke both record this saying of Jesus: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” And the whole Bible records God's concern for the poor and helpless. My quick review of a concordance revealed 18 passages in the Old Testament about God's concern for widows alone. We have been tracing Luke's

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emphasis on that part of Jesus' message but the call to protect the poor is deeply rooted in God's word to Israel. In fact, part of the impact of this story comes from the fact that a true judge in Israel would know that he had a special responsibility to the poor in general and widows in particular. A judge who respected God would feel an immediate need to take care of the widow in Jesus' story, he would not put her off for any reason.

Now, although the unjust judge in Jesus' story is clearly not a stand-in for God, Luke tells us that the point of this parable is that we "need to pray always and not to lose heart." There is certainly much to be said for that interpretation. For one thing, it makes good sense in the literary tradition of the scriptures. If Jesus is comparing God's people to the poor widow, he is in very good company. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah compare the people of Israel or Jerusalem to a widow, bereft of assistance and hope until the restoration promised by Yahweh. So, perhaps we, the new Israel, are the widow, encouraged to plead our case over and over again. It is certainly true that persistence in prayer is a good thing. I read an article by Dr. Thomas Long of Candler School of Theology this week in which he relates a story about the persistence of a very well-known poor and elderly woman, though she was not a widow. It seems that Mother Teresa went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, a legendary and powerful Washington criminal lawyer. At one time, Williams owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles and he was the lawyer for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, among others. Mother Teresa visited Edward Bennett Williams because she was raising money for an AIDS hospice. Williams was in charge of a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help. Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." They agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no. Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no." Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." Williams looked at Dietrich; they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, "All right, all right, get me my checkbook!"

So persistent prayer can have some effect on the unjust judges of this world. What's more, it can have a beneficial effect on us. In his commentary on this passage, Brian Stoffregen tells of a man in his parish who has made a commitment to pray for each person in his cul-de-sac. They don't know that he is praying for them. He said that he doesn't know if his prayers are making any differences in their lives. He knows that it is changing him and the way he looks at and relates to his neighbors. Continual prayer helps us to see other people in new ways, to see our world and our situation in new ways. Persistence in prayer opens us up to the workings of the Holy Spirit in our lives in some remarkable ways. It's a little like the difference between dial-up and broadband internet. With dial-up, we wait until we need something specific on the internet, like to send an e-mail or look up a particular fact. Then we quickly make the connection, do our business and disconnect. We don't want to tie up the phone line for ordinary uses like calls from family and friends. But with broadband, we leave the connection on all the time. We feel free to "surf the 'net," browsing the information superhighway much like we do our favorite bookstore. We don't need to worry about blocking other messages. We can explore and learn things we didn't expect to learn. I think being in a continually prayerful stance enables us to learn things

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from God we never expected to learn. We don't need persistent prayer to change God, we need persistent prayer to change us.

I think we need persistent prayer to change us because, rather than being like the widow in this story, we are like the judge. Oh, not all the time, of course. But all of us are prone ignoring both God and our fellow humans in pursuit of our own selfish ends. That is why Jesus asks, at the end of this parable, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Each of us is continually tempted, by our society and by the darkness within us, to "look out for number one." Have you seen the recent TV commercial for one of the big cell phone providers? I think it's Verizon. In the commercial, a husband and father presents first his wife, then his teenaged daughter and his adolescent son with a new cell phone, assuring each of them that he got them something special, "because YOU'RE my number one." At the end of the spot, he walks out the door with a self-satisfied smirk, looking down at his own new cell phone as he says, "Saving the best for Numero Uno." We laugh at the commercial because we recognize ourselves.

Recognizing the unjust judge in ourselves opens up a whole new possible interpretation for this parable. If we are the judge and not the widow, then we can identify the widow with God. That shouldn't sound too surprising. After all, this is the God who not only restates his concern for widows but who cares so much for the world that he created and for the downtrodden in particular that he became a penniless peasant in an occupied country. When we become immersed in selfishness, it is God who batters at our hearts on behalf of those who need our help. The Redemptorist scholar, Fr. Gary Pierse, writes of this idea, "God is persistent in love for us. God is the hound of heaven who wears us down, like the widow, by persistently pursuing us. Eventually, we yield and let God enter our lives and guide us to do the right thing." In the great vision given to John the Elder on the isle of Patmos, the glorified Jesus gave him this message to write: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

I suspect that all of us here this morning would gladly have proclaimed with the choir, "Jesus is all the world to me, my life, my joy, my all." But this morning's appeal from Bread for the World is a reminder that we are called to care for the least of these if we are sincere in our desire to be like Jesus. And this morning's parable may be a reminder that we need to open the door of hearts in prayer to the persistent knocking of our loving, humble God. Our Loving Creator is indeed humble, like the widow, for she will never force herself on us. We are free to accept or reject God's gift of life. In order to conform our lives more and more to the life God has for us, we must continue to open ourselves up, throwing down the barriers that our selfishness and our brokenness have erected. As Frederick Buechner wrote, our persistence as well as God's is a key, "not because you have to beat a path to God's door before [God will] open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of getting to your door."

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, we will experience a spiritual feast, the overwhelming, never-ending abundance of God's love for us, expressed through the self-sacrifice of Jesus. But it is important for us to remember that there are millions this morning who face a physically empty table, without enough food to properly sustain their lives or those of their children. We will join in a communal confession of our own failings to consistently act in ways that combat physical hunger for our sisters and brothers. We will remember that we have

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been as self-centered as that judge, who neither feared God nor had respect for people. But forgiveness awaits us, as does the strengthening of our spirits by the Spirit of God, who will grant us wisdom and courage, lest we miss our righteous goal. For the gift of Christ Jesus, for his life, for our own new lives and the mission to bring life to others, thanks be to God.