

Pentecost 22\_Year C\_Proper 24\_102013\_mcr  
All Saints Episcopal Church

*"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God  
nor had respect for people."*

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, Luke must have taken the same homiletics class that I took at Sewanee - that's the how-to-preach class. Maybe not, but he appears to have known one of the 'legends' about how to write a sermon, and it goes like this: first, you tell them what you are going to say, then you say it, and finally, you tell them what you said.

And Luke does that with only a slight variation in today's reading. He says why the story is important, then he tells the story, and then he says what Jesus said about the story.

So, I guess I could say, "This is a story about persistence in prayer, God's compassion and not losing hope," and sit down, right?

Maybe. But there might be more to the story.

Jesus begins with, 'There's this judge.' What do we know about judges in Israel? We know they were supposed to maintain harmony as best they could in the community and they were supposed to be fair and impartial in their judgments. We should also remember that, according to Torah - Jewish law - judges had a particular responsibility to protect the rights of the poor - that is, of widows, orphans and sojourners in the land.

Then Jesus says, 'There's this widow.' And now we have a plot. The choice of a widow as the other character in the story takes it up a notch as far as the judge is concerned, since any God-fearing man of the law would feel obligated to take particularly good care of her because of Torah.

And there's the plot twist. This judge is not God-fearing, and he doesn't particularly care about people so he is not so interested in justice, either. But the

widow is not going to take 'no' for an answer. So she goes to him day after day after day, pleading with him for justice until the judge can't take it anymore.

Here, Luke has the judge talking to himself, as do other characters in Luke's versions of Jesus' parables (the rich man, the prodigal son, the dishonest steward), and the judge decides to change his behavior. He decides that if he doesn't grant the widow's petition, she will wear him out - drive him crazy - give him a black eye. So, despite being someone who doesn't respect people, the judge finally gives the widow what she wants.

Then Jesus says that the point of the story is if an unjust judge can finally become one who will give someone justice, how much more will God do that. God is full of compassion, ready and willing to hear the prayers of the poor and oppressed. So we should be persistent in prayer, because God will answer the prayers of all God's children. The end. And they all live happily ever after. Right?

Well, if that IS the point, then we have a problem, if we are being honest. The problem is that almost 2000 years later the poor and the oppressed are still calling out for relief, and, for the most part, don't seem to be much closer to a world of justice and compassion than they were when Jesus told this parable.

And if we read this story as it has always been read - as advice to pray constantly - and if we admit that the poor are still seeking justice - then we might think that such prayer really doesn't make any difference at all.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that there is no point in praying persistently, even when those prayers aren't answered the way we want them to be. It's important to be insistent in our prayers - not only because they might be able to draw out changes in God's mind - but because they can work changes in our hearts and minds. As theologian Frederick Buechner said years ago, persistence is 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."

Buechner's comment suggests that there is more to this parable than we usually have seen. What if we turn this parable upside down and hear it as a demonstration of the persistence of God, who wants us to grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry out day and night? Could this parable speak to the determined, unrelenting One

who keeps knocking on our door, challenging us to respond, pressing us to accept God's claims, urging us to work for the good of neighbors in need?

All through the Scriptures we can trace God's steadfast claim on God's people - the covenant with Abraham, the giving of Torah, and, when God's children rebelled and fell into selfish ways, the sending of prophets to press God's claims and to call for justice and fairness. And later, when the people ignored the prophets, too, God, in the fullness of time, sent Christ into the world to demonstrate once and for all the character of God's grace and love toward all of God's children, especially the poor and the outcast.

Several years ago, I watched the film, *Hotel Rwanda*, the very difficult story of the 1994 systematic slaughter by the powerful Hutu majority of the Tutsi minority. In just one hundred days, the Hutus killed 800,000 Tutsis. The movie is told through the person of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. He is a Hutu who made a promise to protect his Tutsi wife and family and ended up finding the courage to shelter and save over 1200 people by hiding them in the luxury hotel he managed.

As the horror increased, Paul protested that there was nothing he could do, but his reluctance to help was challenged by the steady knocking of truth on his door. Eventually Paul began to see the horror and experience the shame. It was a truth he didn't want to admit, but in the end, his conscience won and he acted to save as many lives as he could.

Paul was not the only one to hear the beating on the door and to experience the need to reorder his priorities, however; it also happened to many of the film's viewers, especially in one telling moment. About halfway through the story, as the slaughter of Tutsis escalated in Kigali, Western reporters began to capture scenes of the genocide on tape. This gave Paul some hope that Westerners, when they saw the scenes, would call for immediate intervention. But when a skeptical Western reporter expressed doubt, Paul was taken aback. "How can they see that and not intervene?" he asked. But the reporter had seen it all before. "More likely," he answered, "people will see the footage, say 'Isn't that horrible?' and then go right on with their dinners."

I remember feeling sick to my stomach when I watched that scene. I knew the reporter was right. I felt ashamed.

Just during our lifetimes, there are plenty of times we could have been ashamed. There has been a steady drumbeat of news reports of injustice after injustice brought about by one group or another. And what has been done to right those injustices? In this country, of course, some civil rights laws were established; and they have brought about some progress, although sometimes it seems that we take three steps forward and five steps back.

Internationally, some of the worst offenders have been brought before tribunals and tried for crimes against humanity. We've seen celebrities staging worldwide concerts to raise awareness and to try to end poverty in our time. But many of us, and I am one, have said, "Isn't that horrible / sad / depressing!" and then gone back to our dinners or whatever we were doing.

So, if this parable is a mirror for our lives, as we assume that most parables are, is it possible that the face many of us will when we look in that mirror is the face of the judge - the one who said I neither fear God nor have respect for people?

It's not a flattering way to read the parable at all. None of us wants to be characterized that way. But, in the parable the judge eventually gives in and grants the widow's request, even if it was more for his self-interest than for any good purpose. What the widow wants is justice and a fair shake. It's what the world's outcasts most often want, and it's what God wants for them as well.

Maybe the good news in this parable for the non-outcasts - the rest of us - is that God is like the widow - unrelenting, persistent, determined. God hasn't given up on us, even when we have acted as though we neither fear God nor had respect for people. So maybe there's hope, not only for the widows and orphans and sojourners of this world, but us. Maybe there is hope that we will tend to the shame we feel and allow it to break through our resistance and push us to open those doors to those who knock persistently. Maybe there is hope that we will hear their pleas at last and use our voices and our power to help shape relief and reconciliation and fairness in this world. Maybe there is hope for us. I believe there is. More importantly, I believe God believes there is.

O God, may it be so.