

**Proper 24 Year C**

“Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”

Our bishop at our recent clergy conference, and again this past Thursday evening declared racism as the number one public issue facing the church.. a public issue for a public church... that reality in our own time has become obvious if we're paying attention....I'm reminded that several years ago *The Quest for Social Justice* and the *League of Women Voters*, hosted by All Saints... presented the documentary *Open Secret*, a thirty minute dramatization of the crafting of the 1901 Alabama constitutional convention. The documentary features actors reciting verbatim the transcript of this convention meeting....So this wasn't a so-called revisionist's take on the birth of this ill begotten document, how it probably must have been...these are the actual words spoken by the architects of our common life in this state.

The head of the Quest, sister Judith Smits of blessed memory convened this event that was held in Stirling Hall...The program was this: first a meal; then welcome; We heard from some folks involved in the efforts to revise the state constitution; watched the documentary and then had conversations around our tables...At each place at the table were slips of paper...one white alternating with one tinted...Sister Judith explained that the white folks were to sit next to a person of color in order to balance the conversation....It was a little awkward.

We watched the documentary...and it was hard to watch...We heard educated, Christian men say things like, the white man is superior to the black man...that black people hadn't the intelligence to govern...that if they, blacks, were to gain power they would wreak havoc with the God-given social order; that segregation was the way God meant for us to live...and women...women were to stay out of the affairs of men....and then perhaps the most appalling thing was that a former governor at this meeting said...that they couldn't make this happen by force (that of course had been tried)...that it must be accomplished by law...so the Constitution was ratified by a state-wide vote....Of course the vote was stolen...in Monroe county for example there were more pro votes for the constitution than registered voters.

The room was deathly quiet during the film...except for the occasional painful groan at what we were seeing....and then it was time for conversation....there was shock...one African American woman said she had moved to Alabama from Boston with her husband and children, and had no knowledge of our constitutional roots...She wondered out loud if she had made the right decision...she worried for her children, their safety....there was anger....there were tears.... We had the conversation... We also acknowledged that most of the gender biased and racist language of the Alabama constitution has now been mitigated by federal law, thank God... with the civil rights act, the voting rights

act, women's suffrage, though not without contemporary challenge...But the knowledge of such a document on the books was hard to bear....we parted having made new friends...and then went our separate ways back into the night... most of us, I imagine, wondering what we could do....what we could do to change things....change for a better Alabama, remembering that we now are one of only two states in the country who tax groceries....our entire system of taxation regressive.... Voter suppression is on the rise, segregation slowly but most surely making its way back into our school systems....our anachronistic constitution the symbol of our dysfunction...an icon of our roots that still has power over us.... So there are people who say it must change before we can change.... I think that is true.

I learned two things at this presentation....First, that the status quo is able to powerfully resist change...It has a dark inertia all its own... That inertia is what the writers of scripture name as Sin... the intractable structures of our society that would oppress and disenfranchise; and the second thing I learned was that evil doesn't just happen by accident or blind neglect....conscious decisions have to be made for it....just as conscious decisions must be made for the good.

Luke tells us in our Gospel reading for today that Jesus is telling a parable about the life of faith...specifically that we are to pray always and keep hope alive....now this is not a teaching on personal piety...this is about the power of

prayer, a prominent theme in Luke... Prayer as enlightened corporate action...prayer as a predisposition of paying attention to our world and then acting on what we know to be Good.... Prayer and Faith for Luke are the same thing....faith and prayer are not things we possess or own...but faith that is an enlightened process, an enlightened practice.....Jesus the Christ, the anointed, the model...The life we are to live is to act for the good in our world paying artful and informed attention to the good and true....faith and prayer attuned to the process of creation...creation itself not a thing, but a process.... A process that God names as good.

And of course, the symbol of the life of faith for Jesus in this parable is the widow....she the ubiquitous figure throughout Israel's biblical history...she, a haunting figure who appears and reappears to prophets and Kings and sages alike and reminds them of why we all exist in the first place....We are to attend to the vulnerable among us... when our high-blown theology fails us, the force of God's word in scripture does not... Take care of my people, says the Lord.... And Imagine, in God's rhetorical unscrupulousness, God's very passion is articulated by a poor widow, the abused and shamed and dispossessed of her world...she the one chosen to speak the words of God...that all things must be recovered, restored, made whole.....It is a reprise of Mary's song, is it not...the mantra from the beginning of time in every world religion...The mantra being: **take care of your**

own...bring justice and fairness where there is oppression and injustice....why do we forget? And why the widow to speak of such vision... why the no-account widow to speak of such truth....Well, it is because she speaks with authority... she speaks with the authority of suffering... God speaks in the voice of the suffering... God speaks in the voices of the left out, the poor, the lost, the least... and brothers and sisters we must hear them! And we must go to them, because that is where God is passionately at work.

I would like to suggest that in our parable today, the so-called unrighteous judge is the status quo.... He is the entrenched institutionalized way we've always done it...perhaps in this parable the judge's delay is that he is waiting for a bribe...maybe he delays because of a conflict of interest...we're not told...but he's kind of like the Alabama legislature...denying justice to the most vulnerable among us...and Luke is harsh....The status quo he says does not fear God nor does it have any respect for people.... And that won't stand...and the only way to change it is to persist in the faith.... That in solidarity with the poor widow of the world we bang at the door of injustice.... We wear injustice down...and for God's sake we don't lose heart.... We persist and persist...persistence for the world's sake.

By now you know, this is a recurring theme in Luke...that faith is practice, and we discover belief, we find the truth through acting out the faith....Luke is

demythologizing the theology of the Pharisees, and the theology of the modern world... the modern day Pharisees... Just believe properly, believe the dogma, just believe and all will be well... but that is an insidious means of abdicating our Baptismal responsibility; that is status quo religion... passive, irrelevant... Our responsibility as people of faith is to bang at the door of injustice to make sure that the widow, and those of her estate lack nothing, that they share in the abundance of this world... simple as that... The Holy Spirit has no love for the status quo... The Holy Spirit is first and foremost about change... whether we like it or not... If we are not about the transforming process of creation, then we are as good as dead, and so is our neighbor.

There used to be a billboard around town (Airport Road) that said, "Got Jesus." You know like the milk ads? How absurd... We are to be Jesus... We are to practice Jesus, else the world implodes at the behest and under the weight of the status quo... the status quo that fears transformation above all things... fears and resists transformation of our community, our state, our world... As people of faith our vocation is to change things for the widow, the least of our world. We are to speak and act persistently that justice might find a way. That is the life of faith... enlightened action... And there is joy and freedom that comes with it.

Luke is making it real simple... simple, but of course in God's alchemy, profound... Luke is reminding us that it is not right belief that we're

after...believing rightly... We'll never get it "right"...for one reason alone, belief changes as the world changes, belief is a process of imaginative discernment, evolving with new knowledge and new revelation...but faith... faith persists...Our practice of the good will bring transformation to a world resisting such change at all costs...we see the status quo at work everywhere...planting the seeds of fear and ignorance...But that's not who we are dear sisters and brothers ...we are the ones who bang on the door of injustice until we wear it out.... And in order to bang on the door we must leave this beautiful building... The life of God can't remain in the chalice and dish on that altar... We must go out from these comfortable walls into relationship with our neighbors who are different from us... we must go to where God speaks; we must seek out the voices of our African American neighbors who have to teach their children how to avoid being harmed by the police; we have to hear the immigrants' stories of the dreams they have for their future in this land.... We have to be proximate to the brokenness of our world... because there in the brokenness, God speaks, and God persists.....Bang on the door dear people of God... bang on the door.... And don't lose heart...persist, because that is what God does.... God persists in Love.... Persist against the resistance...Persist... so that love will at last find a way....

Our faith proximate in this world is the process of love.... So Luke asks us the great question of our time and all time... When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth? That is for you and me to answer.