

“Beating God Up with Our Prayers”

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost 22, Proper 24, Lectionary 29

Text: Luke 18:1–8

Preached October 20, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the God who hears us. AMEN

Have you ever had a situation in which you had to persist in order to get things set right? Awhile back, we were having serious issues with our cable and Internet service. I won't mention the name of the company, because I did not COMe here to CAST aspersions on anyone. At that point, I was a seminary student and also working from home on freelance editorial projects, so I really could not get by without the Internet. I was working away one morning, and suddenly, “poof,” it was gone. Spinning hourglass. “Cannot connect to the Internet. Please contact your provider.” I rushed to the living room: no signal on the TV screen. So, I called Customer Service. They were pleasant enough. They could get a service tech out in...7 days. What?!, I cried. “A week! I can't go that long! I depend on email and web access for my living and for doing my schoolwork!” They wouldn't budge. So, finally a week later, an indoor tech came out, but said there was nothing he could do, because the problem was outdoors. I would have to schedule an outdoor tech visit. I called and was told it would be another week before anyone could come. I began insisting on talking with a supervisor. I kept getting cut off. I was told a supervisor would call back, but no one ever called. I kept calling, and calling, and calling. Finally I got someone who said that my case would be “escalated.” Foolishly, I assumed that meant someone would come out sooner. No, it simply meant that they would send a more skilled technician, but not any sooner.

I kept pleading my case, trying to make them understand how important this was to me. It fell on deaf ears. I waited for the outdoor tech throughout the window of time they had told me to expect his arrival...but he never showed. I got back on the phone. I must have called them 15 times the next day, trying to find someone who would listen. Two days later, an outdoor tech arrived, only to tell me that the signal on the pole was strong, so the problem was an indoor problem, and I would have to schedule an indoor tech visit. More phone calls. I finally called the office of the president of Comcast—through persistence, I had gotten that number out of a supervisor. Two days later, an indoor tech came out, only to tell me the problem was outdoors. Two days later an outdoor tech came...the problem was indoors. I was going nuts. It had now been a full month. When the last indoor tech came out, I pleaded with him to come with me out to the backyard of our apartment building. He protested that he wasn't allowed to, but I persisted. There was something I wanted to show him that I had discovered that morning while waiting for him. I took him out back, and pointed to the garage roof...lying there was the detached end of the cable that supplied our apartment. There was no connection. In switching the neighborhood to fiber optic cable, they had neglected to reconnect our building. Within minutes, he got an outdoor guy over and the service was restored. I'm convinced, though, that had I not persisted, and had I not forced action, that apartment would never again have had cable service.

So, I can relate to the poor widow in today's gospel lesson. We don't know what her problem was—I know it wasn't internet outage—but we do know that she was being oppressed, taken advantage of in some way, that she needed justice to be done. The word that is used for “justice” here is a word that basically means “set right.” She needed something that was wrong to be set right, to be put in order. In those days, widows and orphans were at the bottom of the heap socially and economically, the very definition of “powerless.” They lived on the margins of life and death, often in dreadful poverty, many dependent on distant relatives and strangers. People frequently took advantage of them. A widow in a patriarchal society had no one to advocate for her...so this woman takes it in her own hands, something that women didn't often do. But this judge just couldn't be bothered. He simply didn't care. He couldn't care less about what God had to say about justice for widows. He didn't respect any of the people who came to him seeking justice, and most especially he didn't care about this widow, whom he found, well, annoying. But like Jacob wrestling all through the night with the mysterious stranger, she wasn't going to let him go until he blessed her. Our translation is kind of wimpy about how persistent the woman was...the Greek says she was beating this judge black and blue with her cries for justice, that she was giving him a black eye. So finally, he caves in and gives her what she's asking for. He's still unjust, he still doesn't fear God or respect people, he simply wants her to go away and leave him alone. So he grants her request.

Now, we have to be careful here. We're so conditioned to look for God as one of the characters in Jesus' parables that it's easy to assume that God is the judge in question, but he's not. Notice that the judge here doesn't fear God...so he's not God here. Jesus' point is that, if an *unjust* judge will finally give justice, then how much more can we be sure that the *just* judge, our God, will give justice, will set things right, and will do it more swiftly. The unjust judge brought about justice slowly, and only because he wanted to make things better for himself, out of self-interest, to make this persistent widow go away. But the Just Judge of the Universe will bring about justice out of love for all that he has made.

There are so many things that need to be set right in this world, aren't there? There are so many folks who are crying out for justice, pleading for their voices to be heard, for things to be made right and equitable, pleading for fairness, pleading for the things they need to survive. They come to unjust politicians and judges seeking justice, but are greeted by self-interested people who grant justice only when it serves them. They often have no voice in our systems, and their cries for things to be set right aren't heard. And when they persist, they're branded as troublemakers: "Why don't they just go away?" And so many begin to despair of ever knowing justice, and sink into apathy, resigned to things staying just the way they are, and give up all hope. Now, sometimes the political system will bring about justice...but usually not out of any sense of righteousness, but because those in power have found a way for it to benefit them, even if that benefit is for those crying out for justice to go away and be quiet for awhile. But that's not the way God works. We have the promise that God will always act justly, will always come and redeem broken situations, will always set things right.

But, you say, why hasn't God done it yet? We pray week after week for peace in our world, for the hungry, for the poor for those oppressed by injustice. We pray week after week for the sick and the sorrowing. And yet we still have hungry folks, we still have injustice, and people still are sick and grieving. Sometimes it seems that God is not listening, is not answering our prayers, and we are tempted to give up, to stop praying. Sometimes we begin to think that God is somehow like this unjust judge, and simply doesn't care.

But Jesus urges us to persist. To keep praying. To not give up heart. What can that mean? Does God have to be manipulated by repeated prayer until God finally gives up and gives us what we're asking for? No, I don't think that's the answer. God is just, and God is giving. God cares for all that God has made. But God's time is not our time. And God's *shalom*, God's wholeness, God's setting right of things, comes about in unexpected ways, at unexpected times, and often in spite of the systems of this broken world that work against justice and setting things right.

So why pray? And why persist in prayer? Because prayer is about relationship. Prayer is a means of being in relationship with the God of justice, the God who whose desire it to set things right. We pray for things, sometimes repeatedly, because it is a sign of our faithful expectation that God will act for justice and redemption. It's not a question of *whether* God will fulfill God's promises of eventual wholeness, it's a question of *when*. Just as last week Jesus told us that faith equals thankfulness and gratitude, here Jesus tells us that faith equals hopeful, confident expectation that God will act. We pray, not to weary God with our prayers until God gives in, but we pray to stay in relationship with God, to allow ourselves to be reminded by God's own self that God's will and purpose for this world and for our lives is that everything be made whole, and to make ourselves available to participate in the setting right of all things. Now, some of that wholeness may not come until Jesus returns, ushering in the fullness of God's reign here on Earth. But we also know that God's wholeness and justice can suddenly appear, so quickly.

The widow came to the judge because she knew that he had the power to set things right, even though he could not be trusted to do so. We come to God in prayer because we know that our God has the power to set things right...and that this God who neither slumbers nor sleeps can be trusted to do so. So, even though the wholeness may seem slow in coming, don't give up heart. Keep praying. Stay in relationship with God. Come to God in prayer, trusting that somehow God's *shalom* will come to you and to our world. And then raise your voice in crying out for justice and wholeness for all those who need it...crying out not only to God, but joining them to cry out, to "beat up" the unjust systems of this world, because in doing so you just might be part of making justice for others. Above all, sisters and brothers, persist, and don't be silent. AMEN