

*MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
REV. CHRIS MOORE, ASSOCIATE MINISTER
405-842-8897
cvasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
© by Lori Walke*

October 17, 2010

Luke 18:1-8

YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD WOMAN DOWN

I spent last week at the seminary for what they call “concentrated course week.” From eight-thirty in the morning until four forty-five in the afternoon, Monday through Friday, we studied the Book of Revelation. That’s one Revelation, no “s”, as Chris reminded us this summer when he preached a series of sermons from its selected lectionary passages. Some of the imagery in that book is a bit tricky, so after having spent all of last week with it, I am much relieved that Luke eighteen has no seven-headed dragons or prostitutes or green horses for me to explain.

When preaching on the parable of the persistent widow, Thomas Long tells a story about Edward Bennett Williams, legendary criminal lawyer in Washington. This was a man who was powerful and had lots of money. He owned a couple of sports teams, the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles. His clients were well known and included Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon.

The story goes like this: Mother Teresa paid a visit to Edward Williams, who was in charge of a small charitable foundation. She was raising money for an AIDS hospice and hoped that Williams would agree to give her some financial aid.

Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, “You know, Paul, an AIDS hospice is not high on my list of organizations that I want to help. 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 and hear her out, but then say no.

At the appointed time, Mother Teresa came for her visit. Williams invited her back to his office where they sat down to discuss her request. She must have looked like a fragile little sparrow sitting there on the other side of his big mahogany 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. Again, Mother Teresa said, “Let us pray.”

Exasperated, Williams looked up at the ceiling and exclaimed, “All right, all right, get me my checkbook!”¹

Could there be a better illustration for this parable from Luke? Mother Teresa seems to perfectly parallel the widow, and the rich Washington lawyer sounds very much like the unjust judge. If I were in preaching class, finding this story for this sermon text would get me a gold star.

At this point, this looks like an easy sermon to preach. For goodness sake, Luke flat out tells us what the parable is about: the need to pray always and to not lose heart. It makes me wonder if Luke was getting tired of feeling like people weren’t getting the punch lines to Jesus’ stories, so when he wrote this one down, he prefaced it with his own interpretation. The problem of course comes when we only read the story the way that Luke suggests.

Whether we are aware of it or not, when we read stories in the Bible, we are looking for ourselves. Which character are we? And when we take Luke’s hint that Jesus used this parable to teach about the need to pray always and not lose heart, it’s like someone passed us the answer key to a multiple choice exam. Thanks, Luke! We’re the widow! Even better, we’re the good guys in this story. It is the widow who models persistent prayer and tenacity, so if we do those things we’re the winners.

Bingo. Easy sermon. Easy listening.

Insert pregnant pause, cue the heavy sighs because you know she’s not done yet.

But what about that last line in the story? The parable is so nice until verse eight. Luke says that Jesus asks, “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” With that seemingly innocuous sentence, Luke changes this parable that seems to be about prayer to a parable that Luke is using to remind his listeners that God’s Kingdom will surely come.

The language in that last verse makes us uncomfortable. The phrase “Son of Man” makes us nervous because of all the baggage biblical interpretation has attached to it over the years. And then we get even more nervous about the fear-based baggage attached to the text that makes it seem like the verse is predicting a wild apocalyptic second coming.

¹ Thomas Long. “Praying Without Losing Heart.” Chicago Sunday Evening Club, program 5101: Oct. 7, 2007. http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/long_5101.htm, accessed October 14, 2010.

So what does that question mean? For the purposes of this sermon, I'm going to ask you to do some word substitution. Instead of reading, "Son of Man" in that question, let's substitute God. Now it sounds like this, "And yet, when God comes, will God find faith on earth?"

So when we consider the parable in light of the ending question, does it change anything? Luke says that Jesus' punch line question was, "Will God find faith on earth?" but where was that in the story of the unjust judge and the widow. The widow prayed and the judge caved. Faith isn't mentioned, just persistence. All of the sudden this sermon doesn't seem so easy.

Of course there's nothing really wrong with reading the story the first way. We *do* need to be persistent in prayer; prayer serves as a way to acknowledge that things in the world are not right, that justice is often absent. And in persistent praying we are acknowledging that we do trust that God is active in making the world right and we are a vital part to bringing justice. As they say in seminary, "That will preach."

But it seems to me that Jesus' question at the end of the story shakes things up. It looks like we have to start all the way over and identify the characters again. In light of the question, "Will God find faith on earth?", I suggest that the widow's function is not just that we should pray persistently. The widow's function is tell us about God. In fact, I think the widow *is* God.

But now we have a problem. Because if God is the widow, we have to ask, "To whom is she pleading for justice?" The answer has to do with Jesus' question about whether or not God will find faith on earth. Jesus is challenging his audience to live justly so that yes, God *will* find faith on earth. All of which puts us in the role of the unjust judge in the parable.

To understand ourselves as judge all it takes is to be reminded of our modern-day apathy, when we fail to be passionate for justice, and many times don't care much for our neighbor, either. Might we be too concerned with our own busyness that we don't have time to live deeply in our faith? Have we let ourselves ignore cries for justice because we live a little too comfortably, separated by oceans or walls or electronic surveillance systems?

Perhaps a different parallel story to the parable of the unjust judge, who cares not for justice or for people, would fit this interpretation better. But let me warn you, it is decidedly less cheery.

In 2004, the film "Hotel Rwanda" premiered in movie theaters across the United States. The movie is about the 1994 mass genocide of the Tutsi tribe in Rwanda, Africa, by the Hutu minority. A reluctant hero is found in Paul Rusesabagina, the manager of an upscale European Hotel, who finds a way to offer asylum to and save the life of nearly 1300 Tutsis.

A repeated theme in the film is that if the Americans or Europeans only knew about the genocide, they would do something about it.

There is a powerful scene in the movie when an international press agent staying at the hotel comes back for the evening with footage of the horrific slaughter. When Paul Rusesabagina sees the graphic film clip, he prophesies that now, after seeing this, the world will certainly come to the rescue. The cameraman shakes his head at Paul, and sadly, quietly says, “No, the world will look up briefly from their dinner table, comment on how terrible it is, and then return to their meal.”

Unfortunately, the world was like the Unjust Judge, as “over the course of 100 days, almost one million people were killed in Rwanda. The streets of the capital city ran red with rivers of blood, but no one came to help. There was no international intervention in Rwanda, no expeditionary forces, no coalition of the willing. There was no international aid for Rwanda. Rwanda's Hutu extremists slaughtered their Tutsi neighbors and any moderate Hutus who stood in their way, and the world left them to it.”²

Yes, though painful, it doesn't take much to see ourselves as the unjust judge. Especially when it appears that the world is content to watch another Rwanda happen in Darfur.

And without too much work we can see God as this widow, constantly vying for our attention, time after time approaching us in the hope that we might notice her and stop to do what she is asking.

And we can find hope in this. When we read the story and see God as the widow and ourselves as the judge, we know that God does not give up on us. Apparently, God operates under the assumption that enough persistence, enough reminding, enough pleading will get our attention and we will work for justice. God refuses to be turned away. She will keep after us until we are moved to act.

And perhaps God knows that if we are moved to act once, we will be moved to act again and again and again. So that at some point it will be impossible for us to hear about injustice, comment on how terrible it is and return to our meal at the dinner table because we will be too busy living out our faith.

Amen.

² “The Story:” Hotel Rwanda. <http://www.unitedartists.com/hotelrwanda/main.html> accessed 14 Oct. 2010.