

Good Shepherd, Norfolk, VA
October 20th, 2019
29th Sunday after Pentecost/C
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Luke 18:1-8

Recently a friend told me this story. I knew that one time in his life he had been a monk, in fact a Roman Catholic Franciscan friar who had lived in a community of fellow Franciscan friars. My friend said that on the evening of December 26th, 1991 he and his fellow friars were in the common room of their monastery watching the evening news on television. The lead story for the day was about the drama in what was then the United Soviet Socialist Republic, known by most as simply the USSR or “Russia.” After a long period of a crumbling infrastructure, a failed economy, and protests in the streets, the leaders declared the USSR to be extinct. With one parliamentary resolution to their Supreme Court, the USSR was no more. All the Baltic states which had been a part of the USSR became independent. Watching this astonishing story that most back then thought would never happen there were shouts of joy and laughter. One of the Franciscan friars sitting with my friend exclaimed, “I guess they made the difference – a true and unique difference...”

Then my friend went on to explain what his fellow friar meant by, “They made the difference...” On the other side of the courtyard the from the friars was a house of sisters, nuns. Occasionally the friars and nuns would share a night of television, reading or study. My friend’s fellow friar recalled that across the courtyard in the company of nuns there were three who had emigrated from the USSR. Every night these three nuns had for the last 35 years prayed with their rosary beads in hand asking God to destroy the USSR oppressive government so that the Russian people could finally be free. Every night for 35 years the nuns prayed for the fall of the government of the USSR: “They made the difference.”

Hmmm? Let’s be honest with one another. While I’m sympathetic to the faithful quest of those nuns, women who were very serious about their faith and their prayer, just how could their prayers have made a difference? Did their prayers actually cause the leaders of the fall of the USSR, the Soviet Union, a government which many of us had for many years characterized as the evil empire? What was the relationship between their prayers and the collapse of that government?

The place to start is with Jesus in our Gospel lesson. Allow me to set the scene. Jesus was sitting around with his friends and his followers. Yet not everyone around was a friend. There were foes as well. It is probable that within earshot of Jesus – close enough to hear everything Jesus said – there were people who are not very fond of him. These are the people who saw Jesus as a troublemaker who was always stirring up trouble for them. The envisioned Jesus as the scoundrel who was challenging their status quo life. Some of those on the outer circle may

have been religious leaders, while others may have had ties to the government in power.

Jesus was telling a story, that he called a parable, a story that was designed to bring truth to light. Though the story may have some basis in fact, it could have been created wholly in Jesus' imagination. Yet, no matter; Jesus used these made-up stories to get people to ponder the deeper truth he was trying to illustrate. Through the story Jesus wanted his listeners to know about about the need to be persistent in prayer.

The story is about a man who serves as a judge, a man with a great power to grant or not grant people their requests. In the community where the judge lived, people would come from all around to bring their needs to him. Jesus was careful to specify that this particular judge was neither a believer in God, nor was he a person who had what we might call a soft heart for the needs of people. It is to this Judge that the woman who was a widow came with her needs. Did she actually think that he would help her?

In Jesus' day widows, women whose husband was no longer living, were among the most socially and economically marginalized persons in all of society. Widows were some of the most destitute persons in society. When the people heard Jesus describe a widow as the prime actor in the parable story, they would have known that you could have substituted a number of other people in the story: orphans, the poor, the sick, resident aliens and foreigners. These people were the least powerful in all of society. Immediately hearers would have known that between the widow and the judge there was an enormous power differential. The widow had no power whatsoever, and the judge, he had it all.

Jesus said that the woman wanted justice or fairness from the judge, but nowhere does Jesus describe the situation for which the widow wants to be given a fair shake. Jesus' enemies would have heard something else in the story. This persistent widow was a "trouble-maker" par excellence, just like Jesus! In the original language in which this parable was written the judge characterized the actions of the widow as those of a boxer who is in a fight. Though we read and heard the words, "...because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming,"¹ those words lack the impact that Jesus wanted to have. Another way to hear that verse is, "...because this widow causes trouble for me, I will give her justice, so that she may not, in the end, give me a black eye by her coming."

There are many faithful people in our world who are continually knock on the doors of those who have power to grant justice and at the same time persistently offer their prayers to God. These faithful may be the parents whose children are starving while huge amounts of food go to waste elsewhere. They may be the victims of crime who watch perpetrators walk free. They may be persons of color for whom

¹ Luke 17:5, NSRV

opportunities for work or leadership are shut off by an institutionalized racism that we tolerate.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail:”

“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”²

Our persistent and repeated prayers can motivate us to move from passivity to action. Rather than passively waiting for God to meet our needs, I believe that there are times when our prayers call us up and enlist us for active duty. I always know that call-up to action is happening when through my persistent prayers I reflect, “Somebody ought to do something about that.” Inevitably that “somebody” is me.

Thomas Merton was a monk whose life was dedicated to prayer. About the act of prayer he wrote that “It is a risky thing to pray...”³ When we pray we risk being enlisted for an action that otherwise we would not take. Prayer, particularly retreated prayer, can change our lives.

Prayer is a way of connecting us to God; to connect us to greatest power that can ever affect us or the people in our world: the love of God in Jesus Christ. Our prayer may not immediately, if ever, change the situation in front of us, yet inevitably the very act of persistent prayer will change us. Day-in-and-day-out repeatedly you’ve been praying for something, and then one day it occurs to you to pay a visit, pick up the phone, to send a text message or an email to the person for whom you are praying to ask how things are going? When you visit, make that call, send that text, or write that email, you have the potential to personally be changed and to change the person for whom you are praying. You see, it is not necessarily as important for a person to care for another person as it is for that other person to know that he or she is cared for; that he or she is loved. At the very center of prayer is love. When prayer is turned into action, then love is there. Not only is this the love of God that passes all understanding, it is the love of God in Jesus that changes us and changes the person or persons for whom we pray.

² Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin Group, 1964), 80–81.

³ Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton, Monk*, ed. Patrick Hart (Cistercian Publications, 1974), 89-90.

In and through persistent prayer, we are presenting ourselves to God in such a way that we can take that risk to be vulnerable and to be open to God's ultimate call to action. As Richard Rohr has written, "You gradually allow yourself to be seen, to be known in every nook and cranny; nothing hidden, nothing denied, nothing disguised. And the wonderful thing is, after a while you feel so safe and you know you don't have to pretend anymore."⁴

With some confidence I know that at Good Shepherd there are a number of you who faithfully practice a Twelve-Step recovery program. As one personally acquainted with life within one of those programs, I know that a central part of recovery is theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer." Frequently we like to use the first line of that prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."⁵ Yet few of us use the next lines of the prayer: "Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace; taking, as [Jesus] did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that he will make all things right if I surrender to his will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with him forever in the next."⁶

Surrender is the risky part of prayer. The widow who repeatedly confronted the judge had surrendered. The call of God is to surrender – surrender to live in the very center of the love of God we know in Jesus Christ. Through their prayers those three nuns had surrendered to God in prayer.

This morning there are people of Good Shepherd who have said that they want to surrender to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Publicly this morning they will proclaim that surrender in and through the renewal of the vows that were made for them at their baptisms. This is risky business that at some point in your lives will call you to action; action to live out the love of God in Jesus Christ. Confirmands, please stand. Are you ready to take the risk? AMEN.

⁴ Richard Rohr, "Ultimate mirroring," Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation for February 21, 2014. Retrieved May 30, 2019].

⁵ <https://www.celebraterecovery.com/resources/cr-tools/serenityprayer>. Accessed 10/19/2019.

⁶ Ibid.