

Luke wrote his Gospel a generation or so after Jesus died. By then, his followers were starting to feel discouraged. They were tired of waiting for Jesus to return and finally bring all things to fulfillment. They were anxious and suffering. And so Luke writes as a way to encourage the new Christian community, to keep them focused on the core message of Jesus, to help them practice faithful patience.

However, through the centuries, this parable has been read more as an instruction to "nag" God with our repeated requests, so that God, like a weary and worn-down parent, will eventually give in and give us what we want. The problem with that simplistic interpretation is the reality that prayers are quite frequently **not** answered, and the logical conclusion is that the person praying did not pray hard enough or good enough or long enough for God to act in the desired way. A false theology has developed that if one's faith is strong, they will have all their prayers answered, their needs met, their suffering will end, and God will ensure their prosperity. Perhaps we can find a different way to look at the story:

Jesus, true to form, uses a figure from the very edges of society to teach his followers a lesson. The word for 'widow' in Hebrew means 'silent one' or 'one unable to speak.' In the patriarchal Mediterranean world males alone played a public role, and women did not speak on their own behalf. So this "silent one" crosses cultural boundaries, crying out from the very edge of society, when she finds her voice and speaks up for herself.

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we hear that widows, orphans, and aliens (all those who have neither seat nor voice), and those who are perceived by others to be broken, abide in the heart of God and are the focus of God's concern.

Widows, orphans, aliens, the infirm and mentally ill are survivors because they have no other choice. They have to work around the margins of their society because its very structure is slanted against them. (Remember Ruth and Naomi? The people of Israel in exile? Or the woman who bled for 12 long years?) They do what they must to ensure their survival. They cry out from the pages of Scripture for justice, and God hears their cry.¹

¹ The Rev. Kate Matthews, Proper 24C

This widow, this beloved child of God, persisted, knowing that she was not in fact broken or voiceless, knowing she held great value in God's eyes. She said what she wanted – out loud, day and night, over and over – not because she believed she'd get what she wanted, but because saying it was how she remembered who she was. It was how she remembered the shape of her heart...²

It makes me wonder about the shape of my own heart and the health of my prayer life. It makes me wonder if I hear the voice of those in our culture that we deem broken, who live in the margins, who have been silenced ~ does my knowledge that they abide in God's heart affect the way I open my own? It makes me wonder if I use the voice I'm privileged to own, or if I've silenced myself. It makes me wonder if my prayers are focused on my own short-sighted desires, or on the larger needs of the community. It makes me wonder if I play it safe in my living my faith, or if I'm open to transformation.

It think it's probably normal that many of our prayers are centered on seeking God's comfort with respect to the challenges life brings our way. On some level we believe it to be God's job to create order out of the chaos of our lives – we consider God the great Santa in the sky, after all. However, that mindset is not at all supported by Scripture. Like many of the Biblical greats such as Jacob, David, Jonah, and Peter, we strive to tell God how we think things should unfold. We persist in telling God what it means to be with us – to keep us safe, to feed and clothe us, to preserve our lives in peace – but the God we've covenanted with provides a very different answer to that prayer: one that involves personal struggle, material hardship, social embarrassment, questions that aren't always answered ... and yet the God we've covenanted with *always* provides a blessing that promises God's presence is with us every step of the way.

As the people of God, we hopefully recognize that the world does not revolve around us. The self-centered, daily wish lists we recite to the 'Santa in the sky' fall short of the relationship God longs to share with us. Because God calls us to focus our attention not on the self or those at the center, but to those on the edges. And our baptismal vocation as Kingdom-builders necessitates that we stand on that same edge, to serve as a living retaining wall so that no one gets lost or purged or left behind. We are to be on that edge so we can not just hear the cries of the voiceless ones, but see them crying, feel their struggle, and cry out in solidarity with them. And we are to **do** something about the injustice they feel (feed them, clothe them, provide meaningful work and honest pay, care for their minds, bodies

² Adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, "Bothering God" in *Home by Another Way*.

and spirits) and then work for the full inclusion of every single marginalized person, welcoming God's beloved into full participation in the life of the Holy.

I think one of the ways the Church fails God's people is that we don't point out the obvious very well: **as Christians, when we give our lives over to prayer, to working for justice, to living our faith in Jesus Christ, our life stops being about us.** If we're coming to church on Sunday mornings and not getting involved in any of the ministries, it might be worth thinking about what our motivations are for being here. If I approach God to seek spiritual nourishment without then going out and seeking ways to feed others, perhaps I've made my faith about myself. If we come to church to be comforted without then going and comforting others, perhaps we've made our faith about ourselves. If you come seeking personal transformation without then going out and transforming the community, perhaps you've made your faith about yourself. Being a Christian, following Jesus, isn't about any one of us ... it's about all of us, together. To put it simply, if your faith is about you, then it's not about God.

Community, relationship, justice, faith, prayer, gratitude (which Furman preached about last Sunday) ... it's all connected.

Our Old Testament lesson highlights these themes for us very well. Jacob, from the very get-go, makes one poor choice after another, resulting in his exile from the land and people with whom he belongs. Eventually he returns, to the Jabbok (a play on Jacob's name, but that means "to empty itself"), and he is drawn to the river's edge. There he empties himself of his self-centered motives, of his material possessions, of his emotional and spiritual baggage ... to be held accountable, to purge himself of his guilt, and to make an effort to reconcile with God and brother. Here he wrestles with an angel and experiences a baptism of sorts. On the edge of a new day as the dark of night fades, Jacob emerges from this encounter changed, forgiven, and blessed. Through the grace of God, he has been born again, restored to wholeness, and renamed.

Jacob's faith, his prayer, his desire to seek justice with his brother, knowing things might not go well for him, brings reconciliation and restoration to fulfillment.

Jacob's limp becomes a metaphor for Israel's life with God. As well as our life with God. God is active and engaged, even though we still experience struggle and grief and pain and fear. We struggle with illness and financial uncertainty, with personal disasters and broken relationships, and most agonizing of all I think, with the suffering of those whom we love. We struggle with human greed and indifference; we are frustrated and angered and bewildered by violence and natural disasters. And like Jacob, we wrestle with God, with our questions, with our

doubts, up close and face to face, not in detached consideration but with deep consternation.

The Christian life is one in which (like the widow and like Jacob) we are called to stand on the edge, even if our knees are knocking, with our toes dangling in another dimension, unsure of what lies beyond. Yet we push ourselves further and further into that edge – as we watch our loved ones struggle, as we try to make sense of the chaos that swirls around us, as we cry out with and for those who have lost their voice, as we pray unceasing prayers that may seem never to be answered – because this is where we find communion with God and each other. As we lean into that edge, we give voice to the cries around us, trusting that God is present and active among us, responsive and reliable, merciful and good. We lean into that edge trusting that reconciliation and restoration, wholeness and fulfillment, transformation and blessing will ultimately be granted.

As the widow owned her God-given voice, she fervently prayed and advocated for justice, and never lost heart. Through his experience of emptying himself on the bank of the Jabbok, Jacob learned the shape of his own heart, discovered it was not broken, but rather discovered that it was filled with strength and hope and promise.

Jesus' parable isn't really about the persistent widow or the unjust judge, but rather about God. It's a story of encouragement about the shape and scope of God's heart. It's about God's open-ended invitation to engage always and everywhere, regardless of where we are or where we have been. It's about the reliability of God to hear and be responsive to our prayers, even when they aren't answered on our terms.