

This Sunday's Reading – The 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – The theme of today's readings is perseverance in prayer with an underlying theme of faith.

Today's first reading is taken from the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Pentateuch, which is traditionally attributed to Moses as its author. However, the Pentateuch was written sometime during the reign of King David, some 200 years after Moses. Exodus is Greek for "Departure" and recounts the story of the Israelites in Egypt, the flight from Egypt, and the making of the covenant with God. This particular reading from chapter 17, recounts how the Israelites defeated the Amalekites in the Sinai desert. This occurred less than 3 months after the Israelites left Egypt. It is also interesting to note that this is the first time in scripture that Joshua is mentioned. This event took place at Rephidim right after Moses struck the rock that provided water for the Israelites (Exodus 17:1-7). The St. Charles Borromeo Bible Study group of Picayune, MS, describes the Amalekites – "Amalek is not a person, but a nomadic tribe listed in the genealogy of Esau (Genesis 36:12). Just as Jacob fought with Esau, so their descendants are destined to fight. The Amalekites controlled the caravan routes between Egypt and Arabia". If taken out of context, it might appear that by praying to God, He will defeat your enemies for you. That is not the point. The Israelites believed that Moses spoke with God's authority and that God would help them. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column adds this comment on prayer in biblical time – "On one hand, for instance, our sacred authors tell us God answers our prayers. That's certainly the message behind our Exodus reading. "As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, Israel had the better of the fight, but when he let his hands rest, Amalek had the better of the fight." The Exodus author isn't describing some esoteric, magical gesture in telling us about Moses' raised hands. In the biblical period, one normally prayed with one's hands extended, as eucharistic presiders do today. The practice of "folding" hands in prayer developed long after the biblical period. So the sacred author is telling us that as long as Moses prayed, Israel was winning; Yahweh was answering his prayer". It is Moses' perseverance in holding up the staff of God and his belief that God would help him that is the real point here. Prayer, no matter how persistent, is meaningless without the belief (faith) that God will hear that prayer and respond to it.

That theme carries through to today's Gospel reading from Luke. Here we read the "Parable of the Persistent Widow". This parable is unique only to Luke and is the first of two parables on prayer. We will see the second one next week. Jesus directed this parable not only to His disciples but also to us. Let's take a look at the three main characters. There is the judge who really didn't care about anyone. Then there is the widow who wanted the judge to make a decision against her adversary. Finally there is the defendant who we never see or hear from. It is important to note in understanding this parable that the widow has filed a just claim against the defendant. The widow never gives up and her persistence pays off when the judge finally rules in her favor. Unlike the judge who took a long time to make a decision, God will render His judgment swiftly. As Jesus said, we must "pray always without becoming weary". However, we must always believe that God will hear and answer our prayers. His decision may not always

be what we expect. Only faith can help us persevere when we pray. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2001 syndicated column adds this comment on faith – “Luke seems to be the first author of the Christian Scriptures who concludes that he and everyone in his community will die a natural death before Jesus returns in the Parousia (Lk 18: 1-8). That’s why throughout his double-volume work, he emphasizes persistence in faith. In the Gospel, the persistence revolves around prayer. Luke’s Jesus first gives an example of a widow who receives a favorable judgment from a dishonest judge only because she pounds away at him day after day. Then he mentions how God, who is not dishonest, “will secure the rights of His chosen ones who call out day and night.” But lest Jesus’ followers miss an essential dimension of faith, he quickly adds, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” In other words, God will take care of God’s obligations. Our job is to take care of our obligations. When Jesus finally comes, we’ll be the one judged, not God”.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* adds these cultural related comments on today’s Gospel reading – “Cultural insights urge more precise translations of this story to show why its popular title, “The Persistent Widow,” is inappropriate.

THE WIDOW

The word for “widow” in Hebrew means “silent one” or “one unable to speak.” In the patriarchal Mediterranean world males alone play a public role. Women do not speak on their own behalf. A widow who has lost her husband and spokesperson to death is in an even worse condition if the eldest son is not married. Younger widows were considered to be very dangerous and were urged to remarry. One of the major concerns in the early Church was determining who truly is a widow. Because widows were not included in Hebrew laws on inheritance, they became common symbols of the exploited and oppressed. Prophets like Isaiah (1:23; 10:2) and Malachi (3:5) criticized the harsh treatment they received, and throughout the Bible widows are viewed as being under the special protection of God (Jeremiah 49:11; Psalm 68:6; James 1:27). Because the widow appears alone in this parable, we can assume that she has no male family member who can appear on her behalf. She is truly alone and therefore in a very vulnerable situation. At the same time, she is desperate. Being already deprived of everything of value in this society, what else does she have to lose? her life?

THE JUDGE

Very likely a local magistrate, this is a stock character for Luke (see 12:14, 58; Acts 18:15). The story asserts (v. 2) and the judge himself admits (v. 4) that he does not fear God and that he is “shameless,” that is, no one can make him “feel ashamed.”

THE CRUNCHER

The widow “keeps coming” to the judge. Remember that this is not a private audience; it is a very public event. The entire community waits, watches, and witnesses the event regularly. What finally moves the judge is not her persistence but rather that, literally translated, “she will end up giving me a black eye” (v. 5). The Greek word in that verse is borrowed from boxing. The Greek language also used the word figuratively to mean “blacken one's face,” which means to publicly shame a person. The translation “wear me down” is incorrect and misses the entire point: “shame.” By publicly badgering the judge every day, the woman repeatedly shames this shameless person. Who knows but, at some point, that she might not even poke him in the eye, literally? And the judge who boasts that he is insensitive to shaming strategies and cares not a whit about his honor ultimately yields to her pressure. After all, in a culture where law-courts were not about justice but shaming others no matter what the cost, this judge would be damaged by the gossip report that a woman has shamed him. He'd never live that down and couldn't continue as judge.

MORAL OF THE STORY

Jesus' conclusion is: If a helpless widow can get through to a shameless judge, all the more can a petitioner be heard by an honor-sensitive God. The moral makes convincing sense in the Mediterranean world but may be less convincing in the modern world. Many believers remember offering prayers that seem to have gone unanswered. Some spiritual wags have remarked: “Of course God answered. The answer was no.” This observation may be too simplistic. Remember that the Mediterranean world is strongly group oriented. The widow's petition was publicly made; for all his bluster and denial, the judge respected public opinion. It was group pressure that made the judge cave in. Americans are individualistically oriented and generally discount the value of the group. Americans generally address individualistic prayers to God in private. No group hears, no group can help. The widow's strategy is worth pondering”.

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