

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 10.20.19
Genesis 32:22-31, Psalm 121, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Story of the Inn of the Good Samaritan Stop in Israel

We all laughed a bit sheepishly, we should have known better, but somehow got caught up in the moment. Parables are like that, they are designed to allow the listener to put themselves in the place of the characters. They are crafted to be real life situations that we all recognize. This is true of the parable that Jesus told in today's Gospel. Who has not had a situation where they felt wronged and which seemed to stretch on and on before a resolution was achieved. To say nothing of whether justice was the actual outcome.

Most parables have just one major point that is illustrated by the story. Today's parable is about the need for perseverance in the life of faith. We may be drawn to the issue of justice but that is not the primary teaching of this story. It is not that the judge would not hear the claim. It is not that the widow was desirous of justice in her claim. The point is that the widow would not give up. She was tenacious in asking.

A word of warning, the unjust judge does not represent God, although it is easy to slide into that assumption because sometimes it seems to take forever for God to answer our heartfelt prayers. The unjust judge is necessary as a foil for the widow, necessary so that she has someone to hammer against. Sometimes it seems like God does not answer our prayers on our timetable, but God does not ever ignore our prayers. That is quite clear in the closing line of the Gospel. "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them." The important words here are quickly grant. God hears our prayers and responds and does so quickly.

So why does it seem like our most earnest prayers are unanswered? There have been hundreds, perhaps thousands of books written on this subject. I've not read all of them, of course but the answers given seem to fall into three main categories: the prayers faith is not enough, the answer is no, God's time is not our time. None of these answers do I find compelling. Faith the size of a mustard seed we are told, is enough to move mountains. The measure of faith we have that turns us to prayer, no matter how small it seems, is enough and more than enough in God's eyes for God to hear.

Sometimes we pray for things that in God's wisdom would not be in our best interest, and so in that case I suppose one could say the answer is no. However, I don't believe God simply says no. Rather when we pray for the wrong thing or in the wrong direction, God stays with us in prayer over time, however long it takes, so that we see the way forward.

The Quaker tradition has a way of praying for discernment that I love. When a path is unclear, the person states their need or desire, and then waits usually in silence. Sometimes the wait is extensive, but wait they do. What they are waiting for is for the way to be opened, for the next step to be obvious, for the answer to be given. They are waiting for Way, with a capital W. I imagine this waiting as two sided. The prayer is waiting for God's answer, for the

way forward to be clear. God, perhaps is waiting for the prayer to listen or for their asking to be modified to be in sync with the plan God has. The waiting becomes a gift, time with God, and in God's presence, patiently waiting for something to be revealed.

When I was a child, my family went regularly to our local Episcopal Church. I remember years of Sunday School, learning a bit more about faith. Mostly what I remember is the faith and commitment of the adults who taught the lessons. One in particular, was a man whose name is lost to me but who I remember vividly. I was in the fifth grade and the lesson for the morning was on prayer, the five fingers of prayer. Maybe you learned this lesson as well. Praise, Thanksgiving, Confession, Petition and Intercession. Just like the fingers on our hands, it seems some of these types of prayer seem "longer", more often used than others. For me the two most used forms of prayer are petition and intercession. It is as if in my prayer life there are parallel concerns, for myself and my needs and for the world, and all those around me. Petition and Intercession.

One of my favorite definitions of prayer is remembering the myself and others before God. Bringing concerns, hurts, hopes and dreams into the forefront of my mind and heart so that I can truly see and acknowledge them. Re-remembering, giving those things that I am called to pray for and about new life. The process seems to be that first I pray, giving voice to what is on my heart, and then I am called to listen. That listening can take a bit of time. It is why, for me, meditative prayer is valuable. It helps me come to a place where I can listen. Then, having listened for as long as it takes, perhaps having argued a bit with God, I come to see my concerns in a new way, and the answer if there is to be one, becomes clear. This process of prayer, listening and seeing can take days, months and in some cases years. And as Jesus says, God wants to answer our prayers "quickly" even if quickly is in human terms a long, long time.

Story John Attorney

The Hebrew word translated as prayer, means to stand in the presence of God, to be seen for what we are and to not run away. We can pray any time, any place and in any posture, with any words, formal or informal as long as we are willing to stand in the presence of God, and be seen for what we are, good and perhaps not so good, and not run away.

There are many more things to say about prayer, and because Jesus so often speaks of this subject, I imagine we will come back to it in the days ahead. For now, I am reminded of the words of Anne LaMott, a well-known religious write. She says that she has two prayers. In the morning she prays Help, Help, Help. And at night she prays Thank you, Thank you, Thank you. These two prayers frame her day. Simple words that can bring one into the presence of God, and can undergird one's day. In that way, the whole of the day is a gift of God and also a gift to God. That, in the words of St. Paul, is what it can mean to pray without ceasing.