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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Pentecost 19
October 16, 2022

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we could sum up today's gospel reading very succinctly.

We could distill today's gospel's reading into one concise truth.

We could boil the whole gospel reading down so as to say this.

The squeaky wheel gets the oil.

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Which of course means, "Those who persistent in their pleading, those who are untiring in their begging, those who continually implore without ceasing..."

"THOSE...are the ones who are finally given an audience. Those are the ones who are finally heard."

This is what happens in our gospel reading, is it not?

Jesus tells a parable about a judge who is "bothered," the judge's word...

A judge is bothered, pestered, harassed, and otherwise hounded by a woman who is seeking justice against her opponent.

Now, it is interesting the descriptions that are given here of these individual, as those descriptions are meant to emphasize a point.

The judge is described as neither God-fearing nor respectful of people.

In other words, this judge is not the least bit concerned about the justice he is supposed to uphold in his position as a judge.

This judge is indifferent to the welfare of people.

This judge is apathetic, unmoved, and cold towards the plight of the people who come before him.

And, then on the other side, we have this woman, who is described as a widow.

And we need to remember that it was a patriarchal world in that time and place, a world ruled by men, a world where women were all but invisible.

And to make matters worse, this woman is a widow, who presumably has no male authority to speak on her behalf—no husband, no father, no adult male child to go to the judge, which is why she herself appears before him day-in and day-out.

So, we have a judge who is generally unsympathetic to the concerns of others, and abuses his office by showing little care for the welfare of others.

And we have this widow whose voice would be worth little to nothing in that society.

And yet, and yet, the widow makes herself heard.

Why? Because she pesters, harasses, and bothers the judge without ceasing.

“Would you just stop and listen to me, Judge?!?”

“Judge, I am going to keep coming to your house and knock on your door, until you help me.”

“Judge, you can’t ignore me forever.”

PAUSE

And we are witness to similar persistence from other stories—stories we see on the silver screen.

There is, for example, the subplot in *The Shawshank Redemption*, where Andy Dufresne played by Tim Robbins writes the State Senate requesting funds to start a prison library.

Andy writes a letter once a week, then later he writes two letters a week, and eventually the State Senate provides a yearly allocation of \$500, just to shut him up.

That is persistence.

Or, maybe you remember the movie *Ghost* starring Patrick Swayze, Demi Moore, and Whoopi Goldberg.

This is my personal favorite example of persistence as seen in the movies.

At one point in the movie, Swayze's character who is a ghost is trying to persuade Goldberg's character who is a psychic to help him.

The psychic can hear the ghost, while no other humans can.

And Swayze's character pesters Goldberg's character relentlessly, even going so far as to sing the children's song, "I am Henry the 8th over and over again," while the psychic is trying to sleep.

"I am Henry the 8th I am. Henry the 8th I am, I am. I married the widow next door. She's been married 7 times before" ...so and so forth...

And then, at the end of that rather annoying diddy, the ghost says, "Second verse same as the first," and then launches into the song again. "I am Henry the 8th I am..."

Well, as you can imagine, the psychic gives in.

PAUSE

But perhaps persistence is nowhere better demonstrated than in the Bible itself, in the story of the Exodus.

Moses and Aaron go to the Pharaoh over and over again in the hope of persuading the Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt, that they may be free, that they can cross the wilderness and enter the Promised Land and become a nation and a people in their own right.

Moses and Aaron are the "widow" going to Pharaoh who is the "judge," in the story of the Exodus.

Moses and Aaron are the example of persistence.

But each time Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh, the Pharaoh either rebuffs them, or concedes only to change his mind shortly thereafter.

And each time then, God sends a plague upon Egypt.

And what is interesting in the Exodus story is the part that prayer plays in this drama.

Since we are talking about the prayer in relation to persistence, as it relates here in our gospel reading, it is interesting, yes, to observe the role of prayer in the Exodus story.

For we see that at the beginning of the story when the people cry out to God for deliverance from their enslavement in Egypt, it says that God heard them, heard their impassioned prayer, and God remembered his promise to his people.

God takes notice of his people's anguish, when he hears their cry, and God sends Moses to deliver his people from Egypt.

The crying out of God's people is the people's prayer to God.

And throughout the story of Exodus, Moses cries out to God, Moses prays to God to ask for this particular plague and then that particular plague to cease, and God listens.

And Pharaoh himself even pleads with Moses to pray to God, to pray for Pharaoh, when plague after plague is ravaging his kingdom in Egypt, and Moses prays to God, and God listens.

Yes, the crying out to God is how prayer is often described in the Bible, as is evident in the Exodus story.

The Book of Psalms in fact is replete with instances of the psalmist crying out to God, and God responds.

But then, in the story of the Exodus, at the Tenth Plague, the Plague of the Firstborn, as it is called...

At the Tenth Plague, there is a loud cry that emanates not from the people of God, but from the inhabitants of Egypt when the firstborn of the Pharaoh to the firstborn of the prisoner in the dungeon, are struck down...

There is a loud cry, a most terrible cry of anguish, of torment, and of grief from the Egyptians, and God, well God is silent.

God fails to respond to the cries of the Egyptians.

There is no mention of God so much as noticing their cry.

God is horribly silent, because as the psalmist says, with respect to God's enemies, "They cried for help, but there was no one to save them; they cried to the Lord, but he did not answer them."

PAUSE

We think about these passages, the story of the Exodus, the parable here in our gospel reading from Luke, and we try to make sense of the world in light of these passages.

Are the cries of the Ukrainians falling on deaf ears, as they are continually being bombed by Russia? We might wonder.

Personally, I see Volodymyr Zelenskyy as the "widow" in our parable, crying out to the nations of the world to take notice, to respond with justice in light of his opponent, to take heed of the injustice his nation is suffering at the hands of Putin.

And I see the world crying out to Putin to stop this war. And yet, I don't know, but I hope behind the scenes, I hope the lines of communication with Russia are such that the world's diplomats are pestering, harassing, bothering and other hounding Putin with pleas night and day, like the widow towards the judge, to stop the violence.

But I also see Putin crying out to his people to rally around his cause. I see Putin crying out to his people to mobilize, to take up arms in this fight.

And to some extent people have turned a deaf ear, some have opposed his cry with public demonstrations, and a great many have fled the country and Putin's cry for arms.

Where the tide may turn, where the balance may shift in all of this still waits to be seen.

And what can we do, but constantly, and unceasingly, cry out to God to intervene, to bring an end to this senseless conflict, and the unfortunate loss of life and utter devastation.

PAUSE

And then we have North Korea rattling its saber by conducting missile tests which are practice they say for "tactical nuclear strikes" on South Korea.

North Korea is crying out so as to be seen by the world. But they cry out with threats and displays of potential devastation.

And the greater region of southeast Asia and beyond is crying out for North Korea to stop its threats.

And then there are the ongoing protests in Iran.

People are crying out in Iran over the questionable death of Mahsa Amini and they are crying out for women's rights, and they are crying out for regime change.

Here in own country, people are still crying out for help following the loss of life and property, all the devastation left behind following Hurricane Ian.

And there is the crying out in Pakistan following the flooding that devastated that country, with over a 1,000 people having been killed.

Yes, there is a lot of crying out in the world today. It is a regularly cacophony of sound.

And we might wonder what we are to do in response to all this crying out.

How do we get God to respond, for we are told that God will grant justice?

After all the unjust judge in our story from Luke...

This judge who paid no mind to God nor had any respect for people...this judge at least responded to the cries of the widow.

If such a judge can be moved to respond, certainly God who cares deeply for his people will respond to our cries.

How do we get God to respond?

How do we get a world to respond with compassion?

That is the million-dollar question, isn't it?

Isn't it?

PAUSE

In our lesson from Genesis this morning, we see God's faithful servant Jacob literally wrestling with God in a dream.

And Jacob says to God, when he has God in a half-nelson, or a leg lock, or some other sort of wrestling hold that God can't extract himself from...

When Jacob has hold of God, he says, "I will not let you go until you tell me your name."

"Why does he ask his name?" Because to know the name of a god in the ancient world, was to have some control over that god.

One could then call upon that god by name, and that god would answer, almost like casting spell over the god.

Similarly, how do we get the attention of another human being? But by calling that person by name.

So, Jacob wrestles with God, puts God in a half-nelson, and demands God to tell him his name.

Our world is wrestling with itself right now. We are struggling with all sorts of trials.

But the one we need to wrestle with most is the one we often forget to call by name.

Friends, we, the people of God, need to call to God, to our Lord Jesus Christ.

We need to cry out to our Lord. We need to pester, bother, and harass our God.

We need to wrestle with God, to let God know of our anguish, our struggles, our trials in life.

If for no other reason, if for no other reasons than for us not to fall into indifference, nor to succumb to complacency, nor for us to become deaf to the cries of the world.

We cry out to God to know that we ourselves are still human beings who are part of the human family and that what we see in the world indeed has an effect on us.

We cry out to God because first and foremost our cries make us human, make us what God intended us to be, people who care for other people.

Prayer changes us. Indeed, crying out transforms us from a lump of inanimate clay to a true work of God's creation.

Indeed, "getting the oil" is first and foremost about US running smoothly as a faith machine of God's making, and to run smoothly as human beings means people who feel deeply for their neighbors.

I think this is what Jesus means when he asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Will the Son of Man find people who have not grown numb to the suffering around them?

Will the Son of Man find people who have not grown cold with complacency?

Will the Son of Man find people who cry out with full-throated anguish at what is becoming of this world?

Will the Son of Man find people who feel for their neighbor, who feel for their neighbor enough to cry out on their behalf?

Or, will the people keep silent and in effect make God silent?

Faith in this context is believing in God such that we feel for the other, and we cry out to God for them, and in that breath, where we cry out, we ourselves become more than just a lump of voiceless clay. We become God's creatures.

That is faith. And that is what God hopes to find here on earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.