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Justice, Prayer and the Long Haul

As a young adult some forty years ago, I found myself in Oregon doing voluntary service with a Mennonite church in Albany. My primary responsibility was directing a summer day camp and Saturday kids club for the neighborhood children, an outreach of the church. I knew people from church were praying about the program. I knew it particularly because I drove the church van to pick children up for activities and field trips. The van had problems. When it rained, and it rained a lot in Oregon, it would not start due to moisture under the distributor cap. The U-joints went out, making a grinding noise. The van had problems. But it never broke down when I had children with me. I used to say it ran on prayer.

This was a time when the logging industry in Oregon had collapsed, and unemployment was high. One of the families I worked with lived in an old house not far from the church. Three generations lived together, the grandmother, father, mother, and three children. At best the parents had part-time work at a service station. For a period of time the family lived only on the grandmother’s social security check. Another time they took in extended family whose situation was similar to their own. They had no safety net.

This was also a time not long after the Vietnam War, when the United States was taking in refugee families from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The church had already sponsored a Vietnamese family when their extended family also needed sponsors. So the church sponsored a second family, this time mixed Vietnamese and Hmong. They had no English, so people from church began working with the family to help them learn English as a second language, and that is how I became involved.

We often think of “justice” issues as big issues: racial injustice, civil rights, homelessness, poverty, economic disparity, discrimination, crime and the legal system, to name a few examples. My VS experience put a human face on justice issues. What is justice for a family like the extended family I knew in Oregon? What is justice for a family forced to leave their home, their homeland, due to war or other difficult circumstances?

In our text today Jesus tells the story of a persistent widow who has been treated unjustly. Widows were particularly vulnerable in a patriarchal society. Deuteronomy 24 groups widows with orphans and resident aliens. They were to be treated with special care as the most vulnerable members of society. We don’t know what this widow’s particular problem was, but we do get a glimpse of her character. She refuses to be a victim. She persists. She keeps coming to the judge. She is in it for the long haul, for as long as it takes. She doesn’t give up.

Judges in Jewish society were supposed to give just verdicts. Deuteronomy 16 declares, “You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.”  
 But the judge in Jesus’ parable is not just. He cares neither for God nor for others. We don’t know if he has accepted bribes. We don’t know if he has shown partiality in return for favors. What we do know about this judge is that he is a narcissist. He cares only for himself. When he finally grants the widow justice, it is not because he has any concern for her. It is because in her persistence, she is making him look bad. In the Greek text, she is literally giving him a black eye!

When I read this parable as a young adult, I left a slip of paper in my Bible with a note. I wrote, “Don’t give up when it calls for a little patience. God *does* listen and *answer* prayer.” Of course, prayer is not a magic charm that gets us what we want. Prayer is not a formula to force God to act as we desire. Listen to how Jesus framed the parable. Luke introduces the parable by reporting that Jesus told a parable about the need to “pray always and not lose heart. “ After the parable, Jesus said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly (or suddenly according to some translators) grant justice to them.” Jesus concludes the lesson with a question, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

This is not just a simple lesson about prayer. The parable is preceded in chapter 17 by a question from the Pharisees regarding when the kingdom of God is coming. Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” What follows is a long discourse about eschatology, the end times when all wrongs will be put right. That is the context for this parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge. This is a parable about persistent faithfulness, loyalty to God and God’s ways, even in the face of continued trials, tribulations, and injustices.

Such faithfulness cannot be separated from the ethical demand to live justly with each other and with God. The unjust narcissistic judge is contrasted with the loving merciful God who willingly grants justice. In fact, some commentators compare God to the persistent widow. God is faithful, never giving up, persistent throughout Old and New Testaments and the early church in calling people to live together in just and right relationship marked by love for God and the neighbor, no matter who the neighbor is.

We are faced with the paradox that God is merciful and grants justice, and yet we look at the world and see many things that are unjust. We are faced with the paradox of the kingdom present now, and yet still to come. Like the widow, we are called to be persistent, to not give up.

Last summer in kids club we were studying the Lord’s prayer. When we talked about the phrase, “your kingdom come”, I asked the children to draw what they thought God’s kingdom looked like. They drew trees and houses, people with smiling faces, ducks and ponds of water, peaceful scenes where everyone had what they needed. When we pray, “your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying for a just world where everyone has what they need, where people live in right relationships with each other, with God, and with creation itself. God’s kingdom is present when God’s people are living and working together in ways that are just and merciful and loving.

Sometimes the problems we see appear larger and more difficult than what we can solve. The family I knew In Oregon had severe economic challenges. The church could not provide them with employment or a living wage. We could plow a strip of land beside the church building, and plant a community garden with the children, teaching them how to garden. We couldn’t provide the refugee family with their old home and homeland, but we could help them learn English and provide for a new home, helping them adjust to a new environment. Those don’t seem like big things in the broad scheme of things, but to those families affected it was big. It was hope.

The German theologian Dorothea Soelle speaks of prayer as a way of finding communion with God. She says that this experience does not “lead to a new vision of God but a different relationship to the world—one that has borrowed the eyes of God.” To borrow the eyes of God is to see the world through God’s eyes. Francisco J. Garcia puts it this way, “Borrowing the eyes of God allows us to pray with our eyes wide open as opposed to our eyes closed, being fully present to the many injustices that people face daily, much like the widow in this passage. It allows us to engage in prayers of solidarity that go beyond our own personal petitions.” To pray with God’s eyes is to see the injustices and continue to seek ways to live more justly with mercy and compassion, seeking a more just and compassionate world.

We don’t know what the future may bring. We’ve experienced the covid pandemic. We’ve seen turmoil in our nation’s capital and gun violence in our nation’s schools. We are nearing elections and don’t know what future they may bring. We know there are homeless people in and around our community. We could continue to list issues and problems until they overwhelm us. But Jesus calls us to keep faith, to continue to pray for justice, to put things right, prayer that compels us to do what we can to live faithfully and humbly with God and with our neighbors. Jesus asked, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” God has persevered with us, faithful for the long haul, as long as it takes. May we also persevere with God, in prayer and faithful living, seeing with borrowed eyes and sustained by God’s presence among us, even as we strive for a world that is more compassionate, more just, and more reflective of God’s kingdom.