

JOIN PROTEST TO PRAYER

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, October 21, 2007

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, DC

*(Please note that this text represents my **preparation** for the sermon, but not the actual sermon itself, since I preach without notes or a manuscript in front of me.)*

Text: Luke 18:1-8

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

As I said at the beginning of my sermon last week, an important strand in my personal narrative is my love for baseball in general and the Red Sox in particular. I realize, of course, that I need to be careful about assigning profound theological or spiritual meaning to the ALCS. I need to keep in mind God's word to sports fans everywhere, in the version of the "God Speaks" billboard campaign: "I heard your prayer. I just don't care who wins the game." It's hard for me to admit this, but God is not a Red Sox fan!

Today's text is about the kind of prayer that God does hear and does care about. It's also about patience and persistence in prayer, and especially about not losing heart when prayer is not answered.

In Jesus' parable, the widow's persistence eventually paid off. I'm sure there must have been times when she was discouraged in her quest for justice. There must have been times when she was angry at the judge when he pretended he didn't know her or couldn't hear her. There must have been times when she doubted that she would ever obtain justice. But to her credit, she persisted until the judge relented. Although his decision to hear her case and grant her justice was based only on the principle of self-interest ("If I don't grant this woman justice, she'll keep bothering me and wear me out"), he nonetheless did the right thing. In the words of T.S. Eliot from *Murder in the Cathedral*, the judge's decision was "the right deed for the wrong reason."

On Friday night, Mary and I saw a movie that is a modern parable of persistence in the face of injustice. Paul Haggis' film "In the Valley of Elah" tells the story of Hank Deerfield, a Vietnam veteran whose son Mike, a veteran of the Iraq war, has apparently gone AWOL. Hank Deerfield, played by Tommy Lee Jones, won't rest until he finds out the truth of what happened to his son. He has to confront both civilian and military bureaucracies in order to receive the justice due to him and his son. As the story unfolds, the film becomes one of the most powerful anti-war films I can remember seeing.

Another important thing you need to know about my personal narrative is that as a young husband and father, I came back to the church because of the Vietnam War. When I had to face the prospect of being drafted into a war I had come to oppose, I applied for, and was eventually granted, classification as a conscientious objector. The pastor of the little Methodist church my wife and I had begun attending knew of my struggles with the draft, and he encouraged me to consider going to seminary. I enrolled at Bangor Theological Seminary in January 1971, and in June 1971 I was assigned as student pastor of a three-church Methodist parish in downeast Maine. Our daughter Julia was born in June 1971 and our daughter Annie was born in January 1974; I received my M.Div in June 1974 and returned to my UCC heritage, in which I was ordained in November 1975.

In the more than thirty years that have followed my ordination, I have continued to explore the many ways in which my Christian faith intersects with issues of public policy. I've sought to expand my vision from being largely anti-war to becoming much more anti-injustice and pro-justice and pro-peaces. And I have sought, with occasional success, to do what this morning's sermon title indicates: to join protest to prayer—corporate prayer as well as personal prayer.

My two most recent experiences of joining protest to corporate prayer both took place in the National Cathedral. Both of these events were ecumenical worship services. The first was held on Martin Luther King Jr. day in January 2003, during the run-up to the Iraq war; the second was held in March 2007, on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the beginning of the US invasion of Iraq. Both of these worship services provide an explicit Christian witness for peace that was both inspiring and empowering.

As inspiring and empowering as these worship services were, they don't seem to have had any impact at all on either the Congress or the Administration. I have grown increasingly weary and increasingly frustrated with our nation's continuing occupation of Iraq. I feel much like Garrison Keillor, who wrote recently in salon.com:

"I'm an old, tired Democrat, sick of this infernal war that may go on for the rest of my life and in which more of our brethren will die miserably, both American and Iraqi. I'm sick of politics today, the cleverness and soullessness of it. I am still angry at Al Gore for wearing those stupid sweaters in 2000 and pretending he didn't know Bill Clinton, and I am angry at everyone who voted for Ralph Nader. I hope the next time they turn the key in the ignition their air bags blow up."¹ (Well, actually, I'm not sure about the airbags part!)

Underneath this frustration and anger and feeling old and tired, there is a theological question: How long, O God, will you delay in helping your chosen ones who cry to you day and night? When will you grant justice in these matters of war and poverty and climate change and racism?

Hank Greenfield's persistence in the valley of Elah, which is where David faced Goliath, can serve as a kind of inspiration for Christians as we persist in confronting these great issues of injustice. The widow's persistence in confronting an unjust judge serves as a model for how we Christians need to persist in prayer and not lose heart. It's not that God is like an unjust judge who keeps turning us away. But it's common human experience that our prayers are not always answered, or not answered according to our timetables, or not answered in the way we think they should be answered.

In light of this, some may ask, what's the point in praying? Or maybe we should only pray for small personal things, not the big social things such as world peace or the end of poverty or the disappearance of racism. Maybe we should simply pray for strength to make it through another day, to be patient in traffic, not to be devastated when our favorite sports team is defeated.

¹ Garrison Keillor, "Sunday morning coming down," <http://www.salon.com/opinion/keillor/2007/10/17/baltimore/index.html?source=newsletter>. Accessed 10/17/07.

What's at stake in this matter of prayer, according to Jesus, is not the product but the process, not the outcome but the relationship. The way to maintain our relationship with God is to be in conversation with God. Prayer is not about getting what we need or what we want; prayer is much more about centering our lives in God, about continuing to hope for that which is not seen, or not yet seen. It's really about faith: about continuing to trust the God who has come to us in Jesus to reconcile and make new, to be in covenant with us, a covenant that is written on the heart.

Why does God delay in granting justice to us and to others? This was one of the anguished questions of the Hebrew slaves groaning under oppression under Pharaoh. This was one of the angry questions of the Judean exiles living with depression in Babylon. This was one of the perplexed questions of the post-resurrection discipleship community. And it remains a question for us, a question whose only answer is: We don't know. We have faith, however, in spite of much evidence to the contrary, that in God's own time, God will grant justice to those who cry to God day and night.

The learning I draw from Jesus' parable and Paul Haggis' film is that no matter how weary or frustrated I may feel when it comes to confronting war or global warming or global poverty or racism, I need to persist in prayer. For the point of prayer is not ultimately to achieve results, but to maintain a relationship: our faith relationship with God. I need to continue joining protest to prayer, for this is what God is calling me to do and us to do. Thanks and praise be to God. Amen!