



Prayer as Beginning of Justice
Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (October 16, 2022)

In today's gospel, we hear Jesus' parable of an unjust and hard-hearted judge and of a widow who was equally as hard-minded. Jesus uses the story to urge people to pray and not to get discouraged even when an obstacle looks insurmountable. In fact, in the story the widow continues to appeal to the judge in such unrelenting way that he grants her request just to get rid of her. Is this what Jesus meant when he said: "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."? (Matthew 17:20)

A superficial interpretation of the story paints God as rather negligent and aloof, suggesting that if we try hard enough, if we wrestle with God in prayer (Genesis 32), we can get God's attention and response. This kind of interpretation sets God in an adversarial role and puts doubts into our mind. We might be tempted to ask: "Does God care about us and the problems that afflict the world? Is God asleep and unaware to the needs of the believers who call out day and night? If God does not finally respond to our prayers, no matter how hard we pray, does that mean that we are weak, that we don't know how to pray, or that our faith is lacking?"

I don't think that's the case, even though we worry about how to pray and don't feel confident in the way we pray. It's worth reviewing what we know of Jesus' way of praying.

In the Gospel of Luke, we hear that prayer provided the context for two of Jesus' extraordinary encounters with God: one at his baptism (Lk 3:21-22) and the other at the transfiguration (Lk 9:28-29). In both of these, God affirmed Jesus' identity as the Son. We also hear that Jesus would quite often go off to pray alone. The disciples admired that and finally asked him to teach them to pray his way, which he did with the Lord's Prayer (Lk 11). We get to listen in as Jesus thanked God for giving the lowly special revelations (Lk 10:21-22) and in the Garden of Gethsemane when he summed up his life of prayer saying, "not my will, but yours be done." (Lk 22:42b)

None of these references even hint that Jesus badgered God. Jesus does express his own wants and needs in prayer, you know?, the "remove-this-cup-from-me" part (Lk 22:42a), but quickly we realize that prayer for Jesus reveals his filial relationship to God. And that is what he has in mind for us: a dynamic, relational, and even mystical connection between us and God, a relationship based on trust and obedience.

How does this relate to the widow who pestered the judge?

Let us consider the way Jesus sets up the whole scene. He says that his disciples "need to pray always and not to lose heart." And then he gives an illustration of what that might look like. A

widow comes to present her case repeatedly before a local judge who is described twice (once by Jesus and once by the judge himself) as one who has “no fear of God and no respect for anyone.”

The fact that she needs to come to him again and again signifies that she is not one of his priorities. Her standing before him is not significant enough for him to pay attention. She has not enough power (financial resources or human connections) to threaten him and he is not necessarily interested in doing what is right. In his arrogant self-confidence, the judge ignores justice altogether.

This is what is meant by the disclosure that the judge has no “fear of God” nor “respect for anyone.” In the book of Deuteronomy (chapter 18), thus Yahweh commands Israel:

You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. (v. 18)

And then, talking to the future judges, Yahweh explains:

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. (v. 19)

The whole people are responsible for the way the judges exercise the power entrusted to them. So, God concludes:

Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (v. 20)

Jesus makes a clear and inseparable connection, in my view, between prayer and justice. In prayer, we seek to live in the presence of God, asking for wisdom to steer our life in the ways of the Lord and doing what is right in the eyes of God. We seek clarity about our vocation to live as children of God, called to a greater vision marked by the desire to please God. hear what the prophet Micah (6:8) encourages us to do:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

Doing justice, living a just life, means to access the divine in us and live creatively out of that power bringing forth life for all creation. As co-creators with God, we give birth to new things, new realities for the wellbeing of the whole world.

Deep down, we understand this parable well. We all have had moments when we either were wronged by someone more powerful than us, or we have sat in a place of power over others. We all have experienced power differentials where we have gone unseen and unheard or we ourselves have ignored another’s plight in a lesser position. We all have cried in pain and in grief, carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders or have not lent a helping hand, ignoring people’s plea, rationalizing our callousness, finding blame only in others for their predicament.

This parable speaks to us about human striving, tenacity, and faith in the face of disinterested and arbitrary power. We see in Jesus’ depiction of the widow a God-endorsed invitation (almost an

incitation) to engage in the relentless pursuit of justice, knowing that as Frederick Douglas famously said, “power concedes nothing without a demand.”¹

Those who are denied justice, Jesus seems to say to his disciples, must insist in the pursuit of justice, must become petulant, returning to the source of power again and again, protesting the insensitivity, the blindness, the opted for deafness. Those unjustly treated and easily discounted have God’s favor on their side² and are encouraged to take to the streets, make noise, and require the attention of those who are in positions of power and can do something to restore justice.

Injustice, I think, can be described as broken relationships with other people or with creation at large. It’s the disconnect from the pain and struggles of others. It’s the lack of true sight, the corruption of common interests, the breakdown of the ties that bind one species to another, the sin that separates God’s intended interconnectedness and interdependence among creatures.

What can restore it is compassion, and in prayer we have a better shot at accessing that compassion. In honest, unselfish, and unhurried prayer we can return to our center and rediscover our vocation of children of God called into relationship with God in creation. In prayer we rediscover the justice that reconnects us, the reconciliation to God and one another desired and advanced by Jesus. In prayer we rediscover our role as co-creators with God, imbued with the gift of creativity to build with healthy imagination the kingdom of God, visionaries and prophets of a new creation.

Prayer is intimately connected to justice. The widow was praying when she returned to the judge again and again. She was actually gifting him of new opportunities for doing what is right. She was showing self-confidence and agency but also compassion toward the judge who could not see how he was wronging her by not picking up her case. She is showing love of the enemy.

Rabbi Abraham Heshel writes: “The claim of one person to obtain justice is contingent upon the assumption that there is another person who has the responsibility to answer it. Justice, then, is an interpersonal relationship, implying both a claim and a responsibility.”³

In prayer, we try to figure out what is right and then act upon it. In prayer, God shows up in the wisdom, the insight, the fortitude, the wrestling back and forth, the resolution to do what we sense we ought to do. And we see the goal to pursue, we embrace the rout to take, we strategize the next moves, always with the knowledge that we do not possess the whole truth and the awareness that goals and strategies might need revision. In prayer we get transformed and we are not the same anymore, our identity gets changed as was the case for Jacob who became Israel.

But God did not reveal God’s name to Jacob/Israel because wrestling with God in prayer is not a one-time thing. God is always to be discovered. The justice we envision in prayer is not a complete justice. If we had certainties, we wouldn’t need to walk by faith. Prayer requires humility.⁴

Let us be seekers of the Truth. Let us engage in prayer that transforms. Let us be children of the Light. Let us be just as our Father in heaven is just. Amen.

¹ “Frederick Douglas, “If There is No Struggle, There is No Progress,” (1857) in BlackPast, January 25, 2007, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress>.

² Psalm 146:5-9; Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 1:46-53.

³ Abraham Joshua Heshel, *The Prophets*, p. 204.

⁴ Isaiah 55:8-9; Luke 11:9.