

# **KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR**

**Luke 18:1-8**

**Sunday, October 21, 2007**

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**It's the oldest story in the book. And no matter how many times we see it, no matter what context it is in, no matter if it's happening to someone we love or someone we don't know, it's always infuriating. What is this old story? It is the God-awful lack of real justice for the oppressed.**

**My own sensibilities about this world-wide pandemic of injustice have only become keener since I have known Marcos. With his unique Brazilian perspective on the world, he sees injustice more clearly than a lot of folks I know. He lived it and he knows it. My own worldview, my own thinking about what it means to be a Christian, has been forever changed by trying to see the world through his eyes.**

**Of course, the Bible has a great deal to say about injustice and the oppression of the weak. The Bible declares again and again that God is on the side of the poor. If this is true, then capitalistic empires are, by their very nature, standing in God's way. Jesus was defined by his ministry to the poor, the outcasts and the nobodies. Just to make that crystal clear, the very first time**

our Lord ever stood to preach, he read these words from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Today's Gospel lesson is a poignant illustration of this old, old human story. There was a widow, Jesus said, who had been done dirty. And all she wanted was justice. So she went to the local judge and petitioned him. Perhaps the first time she went, she thought he would see the logic of her case and grant her justice. But after she had been ignored a few times, she realized what many oppressed people realize, that the system was broken. The powers that be didn't need to pay attention to her because she was a woman, a nobody. As a widow in that paternalistic culture, she had no rights whatsoever – not even to her dead husband's property. That would have gone to his family, and she would have been living at the whim or mercy of her in-laws. Sometimes these destitute women were forced into prostitution in order to survive. And sometimes they simply died.

But this woman was different. She refused to go into the corner and curl up and die. She refused to be treated like chattel. And so she kept returning to the judge, again and again and again, until she wore him down. That is remarkable because this judge did not fear God and certainly wasn't afraid of this woman. But she was a pain in the behind and so to get her off his back, he gave her what was rightly hers. He gave her justice. And then Jesus said: If this unjust judge gave the poor widow justice, how much more will God grant justice to those who cry to God day and night?

This parable of the Persistent Widow is the fifth of six stories that Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke about the coming of the Kingdom – a Kingdom defined by the triumph of justice. This is the story about a yearning for change. And this is a story about prayer. And this is a story about how those two things go hand in hand.

Every week as we pray together, we remember this war-torn world. We pray for the hungry, the sick, the lonely and the oppressed. We pray for those who sleep on the streets of this city. Do you think it's helping? When I say, "Lord in your mercy" and you respond, "hear our prayer," is it being heard? Is God doing anything about it? My grandmother's Cadillac had a bumper sticker on

the back that announced: "Prayer changes things!" Does it? And if it doesn't, then what on earth are we doing here on Sunday?

Well, I believe that prayer does change things, but perhaps not in the way that lots of folks imagine. And perhaps that is one of the points of Jesus' story.

When we, like the widow, ask again and again for justice, something happens to us as we pray. We are shaped and changed by the words we say. We remind ourselves that things are not as they should be. In going to see that judge, having to present her case again and again, the widow's thinking was sharpened. The peripheral fell away as she thought and rethought about what was really needed and how she would ask for it. That's what prayer does. It sharpens our focus. In prayer, the unimportant falls away and the needful rises to the top in a most natural process. In prayer, we begin to understand what it really means to say: "Thy Kingdom come..." Prayer shapes us.

But the Persistent Widow teaches us more than that. The widow connects prayer with public action. Every day she had to leave her house, walk to the court, wait until an audience was granted, if it was granted, make her complaint to the judge and then walk home. And she had to do that again and

again and again until she received justice. We are not called to pray passively, hoping that God will change the world, feeling better about ourselves because we have remembered “those poor folks out there” in our prayers. We are called to pray active. There is an African proverb that summarizes this truth perfectly: “When you pray, move your feet.”

And here’s one more thing: when you knock on Heaven’s door looking for justice, don’t be afraid to pound. Say what you really mean. Don’t hold back. We are so unfailing polite when we pray! Do you think that widow always held her tongue when day after day she was denied justice? No... it got messy. And real prayer is often a messy, emotional affair because it is nothing less than a struggle against the chaos of the world.

The widow would not let go until she received justice. And Jesus says that we have to be like her. That means we have to pray and keep on praying. We have to ask, again and again, and keep on asking. We have to keep rattling the cages until the answer comes. The Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn puts it this way: “Kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight.” And that kicking is done with prayer. And that kicking is done with action. And that kicking is the will of God.