

For the people of St. Philip's-- October 21, 2007

Luke 18: 1-8

Maria Hoecker, preacher

Recently I received an e-mail message, (something someone forwarded it to me.) It was entitled "Things I Just Don't Understand." It had a list of questions for which there seems to be no clear-cut answer. Here are a few of them:

- Why do doctors and lawyers call what they do practice?
- Why is abbreviation such a long word?
- Why is it that when you're driving and looking for an address, you turn down the volume on your radio?
- Why is a boxing ring square?
- What was the best thing *before* sliced bread?
- How do they get the deer to cross the highway at those yellow signs?
- How did a fool and his money get together in the first place?

Indeed a lot of things in this life that we just don't understand. There are many things in this life that we just can't comprehend. For example, we don't understand disease. Why is a child perfectly healthy for 13 years of his life... and then suddenly just happens to be in a place where he suddenly encounters some germ or bacteria that invades his body and destroys it?

And we'll never understand accidents. They are so random and indiscriminate. You start out a day that is like any other day... and then something happens in a matter of seconds... and life is forever different. You can never go back to the time that was before that accident. It makes no sense.

On and on we could go with our list... of things we don't really understand.

- Why is there so much pain in our world?
- Why do good people suffer?
- Why do we hurt one another?
- Why can't people get along?
- And why do some of our fervent prayers seem to go unanswered?

There are all sorts of mysteries surrounding this life. I have a few questions of my own to add to the long list.

- how does love grow? What feeds it?
- how can there be endings that become our beginnings?
- where do we find strength that comes out of our weakness?
- how is it that the more we give away, the greater is our gain?

Now, all of these mysteries prompt us to raise yet another crucial question: What can we count on from God? When we face the troubles of the world, the heartaches of life, the tough challenges and paradoxes of earthly existence--what can we count on from God?

This parable in Luke 18 points us toward an answer. At first glance this parable is confusing. The parable involves two people: an unjust arrogant judge and a humble but persistent woman. The judge ignores her at first, but finally grants her justice because she is so persistent. She won't give up and she won't go away... so eventually he gives in and grants her justice.

Jesus was not suggesting that God is like the judge... not at all. Jesus was pointing out that God is as different from the judge as day is from night. This is what we could call a "How Much More" parable. Jesus was saying: If a selfish arrogant, unfeeling, unjust judge can help you if you ask, then how much more can God who loves you intensely help you if you just ask.

For example, imagine that a woman comes to me and tells me of something bad that she has done. The woman is penitent, remorseful, ashamed, and heartsick over the wrong she has committed. She confesses it in great detail... and then she asks me, "How can God still love me after this terrible thing I have done?" I can say to her, "Well, you've told me all about it... and my heart is going out to you. I just want to help you. I don't want to condemn you or fuss at you or criticize you. I just want to help you make a new start with your life. And if I feel that way with all of my sins and frailties, weakness, and foibles and inadequacies... if I'm capable of that kind of love, *how much more* is God forgiving. God who is the Giver of Life and the Lord of Love?"

That's what we have here... a "How Much More Parable" – a Contrast Parable. If that unjust judge can help the annoying widow because she won't stop pestering him, how much more can God be of help for you? Luke makes sure that we know what the parable is all about. He introduces it first with this statement: *He spoke to them in a parable to show that they should pray without ceasing and never lose heart.* This parable tells us to be patient, don't give up, keep on trusting, keep yourself open to new life. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ, God is present deep within the mysteries of life.

We may never find precise answers to our many questions, but I do think there are at least three things of which we can be assured through the changes and chances of life. We can be assured that God is persistent in the pursuit of us. In three ways:

1. Our prayers are known to God before we can even form the words.
2. God is present with us always in our joy *and* in our pain.
3. God persists with us wherever we may go.

There's an intriguing verse in today's Gospel reading that is at the very end of this story. It isn't included in the lectionary, and I'm not sure why. I think it asks an important question. The parable assures us that *God* will not delay in responding to the prayers of God's people, but then at the end, the question is asked. "how much persistent faith will the Son of Man find on earth when he returns?" That's the question that I ponder today. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Persistence in prayer is something that we can faithfully do, together and individually. We can't solve all the world's problems, and we may not know all the answers to the hard questions and mysteries of life, but we can do this. We can pray persistently and never, never quit. This we can do, together and in private.

I'll close with a prayer. The words come from a Roman Catholic priest out in Kansas by the name of Edward Hays. Prayer is his passion. <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Jun1996/feature2.asp> He devotes his ministry to prayer. He writes prayers for everything, which he publishes in books that are printed on a press at his retreat center twenty minutes down the Missouri River where I come from. I often use these prayers around this place at various meetings and in private. It doesn't even have a title, this prayer, which I find to be just the way it should be said. So without introduction, I'll close with this prayer, I invite you to pray with me in the silence of your hearts. (*Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim*. Edward Hays. Forest of Peace Press, Easton KS. Page 206)

Whenever I pray, O Blessed One,  
let my words be only the containers  
of my passionate love for you.  
Free me from the false notion  
that any combination of letters (or words)  
regardless of how poetic or pious,  
can make a prayer beautiful.  
Unless the words I speak in prayer  
are aflame with my love for you,  
they fall from my lips  
to litter the floor of my place of prayer.  
And the incense of my worship is held earthbound  
by the gravity created by my lukewarm heart.  
If my prayer is to ascend to you,  
then I must move beyond mere words  
to the power of the heart  
that even the most humble speech may contain.  
So let me have a poverty of words  
that each one may be filled with great richness.  
And save me from the error of believing  
that you find delight in the length of my prayers  
instead of in the love with which I fill them.

Amen.