

Luke 18:1-8  
Jeremiah 31:27-34  
October 17, 2010

### The Persistent Steward

For the first time in history the Supreme Court of the United States will have three women hearing cases this fall and winter. Elena Kagen joins Ruth Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomeyer on the Federal Bench. You could argue that these three woman are among the most powerful women in the world. In our legal system, even if you loose your case, you have the right to file an appeal with a higher court. The Supreme Court is the highest and last stop.

Jesus tells a story about one of the least powerful women in the world, in the parable of the persistent widow. In the first century a widow was by definition on the bottom wrung of the power ladder. We have no way of knowing whether this parable is based on someone that Jesus knew; but we do know that his audience would have understood this woman's predicament. In Jesus' time, there wasn't much of a systems of appeal in Rome occupied Israel and so this widow had to hound a lousy judge in order to get justice. The judge neither feared God nor respected people, so the widow had to be relentless in her pursuit. In fact she became a stalker and

everywhere the judge went the widow shadowed him. If he went to market, there was the widow. When he left his house, there was the widow pleading her case. Widow in the morning, widow at night; finally the judge grows weary of being stalked by a fairness hungry powerless one and he grants her justice. The underdog wins and the audience is pleased; but often people are perplexed about this parable.

Luke introduces this story by saying that Jesus was teaching about the need to pray always and not loose heart. Jesus ends the parable by claiming that God will grant justice to those who cry to him. Sometimes people hear Jesus saying that if you pray long and hard for what you want; you will get it. Since we all have prayed for things and events that we did not receive; this parable causes some people to scratch their heads and others to pull their hair out.

Prayer often does not work out as we intend. Not only do our minds wander but often when we pray we get interrupted. Even when we do finally get focused and get our thoughts and feelings in order; God often seems quiet and God seems to grant answers for which we are not looking. Jesus knew this and that is why the parable has a surprise ending. You never know where you are going

to end up when you start praying. Prayer is a journey and what most people find, when they stick to the journey is that somewhere along the way, they have been changed. Prayer does that to you. The sheer act of engaging in the ludicrous practice of talking and listening to God, modifies and even sometimes transforms you. Short prayers not so much change, long prayers work you over. Something about sitting attentively in the presence the Holy, starts to change you up. Like the unjust judge, your perspective is altered and you come out on the other side a little different.

Jesus muses out loud after he tells the parable about whether he will find anyone who has faith when he comes back. Prayer is too narrowly defined when we understand it as only our requests to God. Prayer is actually our participation in the coming reign of God. Prayer is an act of hope, our response to God's persistent love for us and for all humanity. Prayer is the practice by which we stake our claim with God and participate in twisting the world toward God. Jesus did not promise that every prayerful request would be granted, but he did promise that God would grant justice. This parable is encouraging us to persistently work with God for justice, even when it doesn't seem likely or possible. Dr. King captured this sense I

believe in his 1967 speech to the South Christian Leadership Conference in August of that year when he said. “When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds of despair and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.”<sup>1</sup> End of quote. To participate in prayer is to participate in God’s justice.

Often come October, we take time in this church to ponder issues of stewardship. Part of the timing of course is our need to create a balanced and sound budget for the coming year of mission and ministry. This year our Stewardship Theme is “More Than Enough”. Because God has provided the vast majority of us with more than enough, each of us needs to share. God has been generous and God expects us to be generous. God expects us to begin our giving at ten percent of gross income. Because God provides us with more than enough, God expects us to put ourselves

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<sup>1</sup> From A Testament of Hope, the Essential Writings and Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, Edited by James Melvin Washington, 1986 Harper San Francisco, page 252

out for other people especially the poor. God expects us to pledge to and support our church and our charities generously. God expects us to use our time and our talents to transform the world, so that the arc bends towards God's justice.

Stewardship is not everyone's favorite topic. While sermons on prayer are often welcomed; sermons on stewardship may not be as warmly received. Both subjects are intimate; but in our culture self image and self worth are seemingly inextricably connected. On top of this, our culture often teaches that personal finance is very, well, personal. Then some joker or a series of jokers have the nerve to talk money in church. One glaring irony in this dance around and about money, is that you all pay me money to prod you, inspire and sometimes make you less than comfortable.

The reason we do all this in church is because Jesus talked so much about money, resources and justice. He had this sense that money should be used to work for God's justice and to help establish God's coming reign. He also had this sense that faith was not just a mind game or a head trip but that faith calls us to actively engage the world and use our time and talents to shape it in God's image. There is never any sense in the Bible that people can purchase God's

kingdom like in shopping; but there is a strong sense that by using resources wisely and fairly, we help to establish God's kingdom. Stewardship is in fact a form of prayer. That is why I think this parable is calling us to be persistent stewards. Astoundingly I think this parable is calling us to be stalkers for stewardship. We should be every bit as eager about giving, as this woman was about getting justice. I know that in the face of our culture and our recession this whole notion of being stewardship stalkers is a bit counter intuitive; but a bunch of people I know find stewardship to be both rewarding and faith building. Sometimes we focus so much on the supposed pain of the flow of money out of our checkbook toward church and charity we focus too little on the faith that grows and the grace that flows from our generosity. Surprisingly in a culture that is truly burdened with more than enough, there can be something immensely freeing about generosity.

One effective way that we can be stewardship stalkers is by participating in EFT giving to the church. There are three great things about EFT giving, one, you don't have to remember to bring your check book or bring an offering envelop to church. It takes a certain level of stress out of the Sunday morning. Two, you don't

have to worry or feel guilty about falling behind on your pledge to the church. A commitment to EFT giving is pledge and a pledge kept. Three the church has a consistent flow of income - one of the things the church leaders around here used to feel quite stingingly was major worry and dread about the low flow of resources to the church in the summer during vacation and family travel time.

But there is a wrinkle that comes with EFT giving and Ethan Schafer made this abundantly clear to his parents not to many months ago in the car on the way home from church. Up until now when you participated in EFT giving at Ark and Dove you didn't participate in the ritual of putting something into the offering plate. Sometimes we are not fully aware of how important ritual is to our faith and family; but ritual especially good ritual, gives depth and meaning to our lives. Ethan asked on the way home why his parents never gave to the church. After some shock and conversation David was able to explain to Ethan that they give twice a month by EFT. "You know how we go to the cash machine and take our money out" - well of course every kid loves a cash machine - "yes" said Ethan - well we have a cash machine setup to send money to the church.

We have a proposed solution to the somewhat empty ritual of EFT giving and it is in your bulletins this morning. From this Sunday forward we are inviting all EFT givers to put an EFT card into the offering plate. We will set up a place in the lobby where people can pick up EFT cards. By this ritual we will be saying physically and by motion what we have been saying electronically – I support the work of the church through EFT Giving. Even if you don't give by EFT, I am inviting you to put your card in the plate this morning as a way of supporting people who contribute to the church in this fashion.

Lastly I want to remind us all that The Stewardship Team of our church has asked us to do some things over the Next several weeks. We have been asked to pray for and about the Mission and Ministry of our church. We have been asked to help bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice by participating in the Habitat For Humanity Building on Faith Weekend next weekend and the Winter relief Homeless Shelter week in which we need 150 volunteers. We have been asked to read and study some passages on Stewardship from 2 Corinthians Chapters 8 and 9 . We have been asked to pray about raising our pledge by 1% of gross household income. We have been asked to be present for worship on Sunday November 14 which is

More Than Enough Stewardship Sunday. It is on that Sunday that our Stewardship Team is asking that, as God has written God's covenant upon our hearts we all write our covenant on a pledge card and return our pledge cards for the 2011 Ministry Year. If family and our business life seems like it will not make attendance on November 14 a possibility we have been asked to send our pledge card in by mail or bring it to church the week before. Pledge cards will be mailed end of October early November.

We have a bit more power in our lives than widows of the first century, in fact, if we as a congregation became stewardship stalkers, persistent stewards and tithers it would make a huge difference not only in the life of our church but also in our community. It would help bend the arc of the moral universe a little more towards God.