

## **October 16, 2022 - Pentecost 19**

### **Prayer of the Day**

O Lord God, tireless guardian of your people, you are always ready to hear our cries. Teach us to rely day and night on your care. Inspire us to seek your enduring justice for all this suffering world, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

### **Gospel Reading - Luke 18:1-8**

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

### **Sermon**

I'm going to assume that all of you have heard about Agatha Christie. I'm going to assume that many, if not most, of you have read at least some of her books or stories, or seen a movie or TV show about one of her stories. One of these is called "The Chocolate Box," which features the Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot.

What makes "The Chocolate Box" different from many of her Poirot stories is that this time, he fails.

Poirot and his British friend Captain Hastings, who usually serves as the narrator of the stories, are sitting in their living room in front of the fire. Hastings asks if Poirot has ever failed in one of his investigations. Poirot responds, "Innumerable times," and mentions times when he became sick just before solving the case, or someone else solved the case before he did.

Hastings interrupts him and says, "That's not what I meant. Have you ever been down and out over a case through your own fault?" Poirot says, "Ah! I comprehend. You ask if I have even made a complete prize ass of myself! Once, my friend."

He then proceeds to narrate a story in which a box of chocolate serves as the main clue, but which Poirot completely misinterprets, leading him to make a series of mistaken conclusions, and ends up with him identifying the wrong suspect as the murderer. At the end, the true murderer reveals herself to Poirot, but since she is dying, he simply walks away without bringing in the authorities.

After he concludes his story, Poirot tells Hastings to forget the story, since it demonstrates a serious lack of judgement on his part. Then he says, "No! Remember it! And if you ever think I am growing conceited, you will say to me 'Chocolate Box' to remind me. Yes? After all," he concludes, "I, who have undoubtedly the finest brain in Europe at present, can afford to be magnanimous!"

Hasting mutters to himself, "Chocolate box!" 😊

I had my own "Chocolate box" moment a few years ago. A few years ago, before Covid hit, the Lutheran clergy in Nova Scotia decided to do a pulpit exchange. We would go to different churches to preach and lead worship for a particular Sunday. This way, the pastors get to go outside of their usual boxes and see different people, and the members of the churches get to hear a different voice, different perspectives and different insights. It's a good thing to do, for all of us.

So, I went to Resurrection Lutheran Church in Halifax. It was the 19th Sunday after Pentecost (just like today), and the gospel reading was the one we just read. I had done some reading ahead of time, and discovered that the translation we are using takes a little bit of creative licence with the wording of this parable.

The way we have it in our translation, the unjust judge says, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

But the words that Luke actually used when he wrote this story in Greek come from the world of boxing. A more accurate translation would be, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not give me a black eye by continually coming at me.”

I thought this was a great insight! This widow was not just asking politely for a favour; she was getting in the face of this self-serving political hack and *demanding* justice!

So I’m preaching away, and I get to the point where I’m saying, “And Luke uses the word for ‘black eye’…” and I suddenly realized where I was. And it felt like a cold, icy hand had gripped my heart. Because almost half of the congregation that was taking part in that service at Resurrection Lutheran Church in Halifax… were recently arrived refugees from the African country of Sudan.

I was not trying to be offensive. I was not being *intentionally* racist. But in that moment, I was exposing my assumptions about skin colour, I was exposing my assumptions about what constitutes “normal.” I was, in fact, exposing my inadvertent but very real racism.

Following the service, those amazing people extended the grace of God to me, by welcoming me, by thanking me for coming, by inviting me to return.

This event was a significant learning experience for me, and it highlights a couple of things from the gospel reading.

The first is the emphasis on persistence. The kind of growth in faith that Jesus was talking about, the kinds of struggles that Luke was writing about, take a very long time. They take effort, they take work, they take persistence. Things like the unintentional racism which lives within us do not go away simply because we want them to go away. They have to be identified every day; they have to be addressed in every encounter; they have to be acknowledged in every assumption that we make. It’s hard, and frequently painful, work. It has to be done over and over again. One prayer does not make us holy; one time saying, “I don’t want to be racist,” does not turn us onto an anti-racist. These struggles take persistence.

The second thing that is highlighted for me is the fact that much of what I need to be persistent about is stuff that’s inside me. It’s not just unjust judges or corrupt politicians or self-serving corporations who are keeping me from being what I’m called to be. I need to be persistent in looking at myself, and identifying my own baggage. And as I do that, I also need to be persistent in trusting the call and presence of God with me in the middle of my struggles, in the middle of my failures, in the middle of my looking inward. Because it is only the presence and call of God that makes it possible for me to do that “looking in.”

And the other point that is highlighted in this story from Luke is the fact that Jesus is not just addressing me. Luke is not just writing for individuals. Remember the first line of the story: “Then Jesus told *them* a parable about *their* need to pray always and not to lose heart.” This is addressed to the community, to the church, to all of us, *together*. We need the support and welcome and love and forgiveness *of each other* if we are going to be persistent in this journey. That’s why God has given us each other.

Just like Poirot needed Hastings to say “Chocolate box” when he became too full of himself, I need **you** to come up to me after I have said something which excludes or diminishes someone, and I need you to say “Black eye” **to me!**

We will fail. We will fall. We will be confronted with our racism and our fear, with our lack of persistence and our exhaustion. And we will need each other to name what has happened, to lift us up, to proclaim forgiveness, and help us get back to the journey.

Which will take just as much persistence as anything else!

But that’s precisely why we don’t make this journey alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **Prayers of the People**

A - We offer our prayers to God, trusting that, because of Jesus’ promise, we will be heard.

[*Short pause*]

A - Love persistent, you are present always, coming always, sharing always. May all we do, and all we **are**, point to you. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Love persistent, we are called to be present with a world in pain, embodying your compassion and grace. May all we do, and all we **are**, point to you. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Love persistent, we are freed from what we have been, freed to live into what we will be. May all we do, and all we **are**, point to you. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Love persistent, your church is invited to continue to grow into the fullness of Christ, given for the sake of our neighbour. May all we do, and all we **are**, point to you. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Love persistent, use us to be your persistent presence with those who are sick, who are isolated, who are overwhelmed, especially those we name before you.

[*Long pause*]

May all we do, and all we **are**, point to you. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Love persistent, inspire us to be constant in love, constant in **sharing** love, constant in **being** love. May all we do, and all we **are**, point to you. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.