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by Mary M. McGlone

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When we meet the judge of today's parable, we are quickly informed that the widow can't appeal to his good side — he doesn't have one. So, faced with his stony heart, she becomes the water that drips incessantly until something is worn away. To understand this parable we should pay careful attention to Luke's editorial comment: This is a parable about praying always *and* about never giving up. It's important to recognize that those are two interrelated ideas: to be constantly mindful of our relationship with God, and to persist in faith. As the song goes, "You can't have one without the other."

Interpreting the parable in that light may open new dimensions to its teaching. The widow in this story represents the praying disciple, while the judge presides over injustice. For what is the widow to pray? For whom does Jesus tell us to pray? If we search the Gospel of Luke we won't find Jesus saying, "Pray for one another," but rather, "Pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:28). The only time Jesus said he prayed for someone, he said it to Peter: "I have prayed that your own faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32) The implication seems to be that in a situation of seemingly interminable injustice, especially when we have no power to change it, we are called to pray for those who have the power as well as for the perpetrators.

Now while those represented by the widow are told to keep praying, Jesus doesn't say to do so in hiding. No, this widow's persistence is more than obvious to the judge and probably to the general public. A New Testament prototype for the Energizer Bunny, she just keeps coming and coming with her demand for justice. It was like a staring contest between two 10-year-olds: In the end, one of them was going to give up, and we get the idea that she decided to keep at it or die trying. After all, her circumstances were such that she would probably die if her demands were not met. So she won Olympic gold for intractability. Since the judge would not move for love of God or human respect, she got him where it counted — his desire for peace and quiet.

This is a story of salvation, but not as it appears at first glance. Sure, the widow finally got her due, but in the process she saved the judge. She never gave up in her prayer or in the actions that flowed from it. She kept at it, asking for divine help while also devising the tactics that had the best chance of success. She made it easier for him to do right than wrong.

When we look to the widow as a model of prayer, few can do better than she did in making good on the petition "Thy kingdom come." In spite of what everyone knew and said about the judge, she wouldn't stop believing that God can transform hearts. She refused to give in to the idea that he would never change. Like Moses, who kept holding up his staff over the outnumbered Israelite army, she refused to give up. There was no earthly reason to expect success, but if there had been, she would not have needed to pray as she did.

Of course, Jesus' audience probably chuckled at the story as they pictured the pompous judge coming around to do what the lady asked, trying to preserve his dignity as others snickered at seeing who had worn him down. But Jesus' last remark was designed to bring the disciples up short: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8).

That's the question addressed to each of us. Do we really believe God's kingdom is germinating among us now? How far are we willing to go to cultivate it? Are we faith-filled enough to pray for those who mistreat us and for those who promote injustice? Do we desire the kind of faith that leads us to persist, as 2 Timothy suggests, whether it is convenient or inconvenient?

As we look around at our political situation, at the injustice and violence that plague our country and world, there is no earthly reason to believe that it can all change.

That's precisely why our widow friend is held up to us as an example. Weariness is no excuse. Prayer has been found to be effective. Prayer will awaken our memory of Jesus and remind us that the kingdom doesn't operate on the rules of this world. Only prayer will open us to the grace to overcome the inevitable disillusionments we meet in life. Only prayer can open us to the inspirations that will keep us going, and going, and going ... until justice reigns.

### **EXODUS 17:8-13**

The story of the Exodus, beginning with God's call to Moses from a burning bush to the people's entry into the Promised Land, shapes the religious imagination of the chosen people. It's not just a tale to remember at the Passover dinner, but the narrative that foretells the plot of everything else that will happen in history. It is the account of how God chose an insignificant tribe of slaves, led them to freedom and charged them with the mission to construct a society based on faith in the God who cares for all by raising up the lowly.

The incident related today happened early in the Exodus journey. The people had escaped Pharaoh; God had provided them with manna and water. Now an enemy was attacking them. At this point, Joshua makes his appearance on the stage of salvation history. There is more to be done than Moses can manage alone. The people had left Egypt prepared for battle (Exodus 13:18), but until now, they had only battled their vacillating will to go where God would lead.

In this situation, Moses ordered Joshua to pick out a group who could meet the Amalekites on their own terms, going into combat against them. But God's chosen people did not need to face an enemy on the adversary's terms. While Joshua and company were on the battlefield, Moses would be standing in the place of God watching over it all. Not only that, but he would be displaying the staff symbolizing God's power to save.

This incident is actually a replay of the first act of the Exodus drama. In that, God, working through Moses, overcame Pharaoh and helped the people escape from slavery. It all turned out right because Moses followed God's lead, and the people conquered their fear and doubt enough to risk the security of servitude for the freedom of God's promised future. The hardest part was that God's future was unpredictable in every detail except in terms of the struggles involved in getting there.

The story of Israel's triumph over their enemy is not a case of getting God to do humanity's will: making the Amalekites lose to Israel. Scripture never says, "God helps those who help themselves." That aphorism is a distortion of the Judeo-Christian tradition about prayer and action, which is summed up in Psalm 127: "Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build." This story is about the struggle entailed in collaborating to bring God's plans to fruition. Like our Israelite ancestors, we can be certain that God's grace and strength will be there for us just as long as our hearts are set on the mission to which we have been called.

## **2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4:2**

As many know, Paul's authorship of this and other letters is questionable. It was not unusual for authors to use the name of another to seal the authority of what they wrote. This letter has elements that may have come from Paul and others that almost certainly did not.

This selection from 2 Timothy invites us to gaze with grateful remembrance on the development of our life of faith. First, Paul (or the person writing in his name who we will call Paul) tells Timothy to remember those who introduced him to God's love. In Timothy's case, it was his mother and grandmother, Eunice and Lois, two strong women who lived their faith and fed him on the traditions that had come to them from the time of Abraham. The first thing Paul wants Timothy to remember is that the testimony he received from them is as trustworthy and as life-giving as the very food with which they nourished him.

Next, Paul points out that the scriptures Timothy was taught are more than simple folk stories or historical anecdotes. Paul says pointedly that the word of God is *capable of giving wisdom* for salvation. By that, he's implying that wisdom is not infused but is acquired under the influence of grace. It is a result of contemplating life in the light of the scriptures, allowing the storyline God is writing in history to reveal itself. Wisdom is the ability to recognize the divine, to see God's energy permeating the events of each day — where we anticipate it and where we least expect to find it. If there is any doubt about how to recognize the storyline of the drama God is directing in history, says Paul, one need only look to Christ Jesus. He is the ultimate revelation of God's proposal to and for humanity. His life demonstrates how humankind is meant to know God and grow in belonging to God and to one another.

The Letter to Timothy deals with how to be a competent messenger of the Gospel. What is the core of his apostolate? To proclaim the word persistently. Dealing with a situation in which religious imposters could be found on every corner, Paul orders Timothy to stand firm, to proclaim the truth in sun or storm, all the while managing to do so with the tricky combination of urgency and patience.

In this reflection Paul has outlined the apostolic vocation of every baptized person. He calls us to remember that we become Christians in community, that as we have been taught by saints we therefore must teach like saints. Today, 20 centuries later, we have the advantage of counting among our teachers all the saints (including Paul) who show us how to live Christianity, and the holy ones who have engendered faith in us. This is the powerhouse showing us the way to wisdom. Our gratitude for the gifts they have shared with us will provide us with strength to carry on the mission.

### **LUKE 18:1-8**

The vocabulary of this parable mirrors Luke's tales of the friend in the night (Luke 11:5-8) and the gardener whose unremitting activity of cultivating and fertilizing the fig tree is described with the same vocabulary as our widow's persistent "bothering" (Luke 13:6-8). Some would take this reading to recommend novena upon novena, or an injunction like "A few more rosaries and the Blessed Virgin will surely talk Jesus into doing what we want!" Even aside from the fact that Jesus didn't give his mother special treatment, this can't be what Jesus was teaching — not the Jesus who said, "When you pray, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words" (Matthew 6:7).

The persistence Jesus is talking about here has to do with something other than multiplying words. The phrase that the New American Bible translates as "without becoming weary" has to do with the idea of not succumbing to discouragement. In other places, it is translated as "do not be remiss" (2 Thessalonians 3:13) or "do not lose heart" (Ephesians 3:13) or "let us not grow tired of doing good" (Galatians 6:9). We get the sense that Jesus himself was disheartened with the progress of his mission when he finished this parable with the question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Humor was obviously part of Jesus' antidote to the doom-and-gloom attitude that the world's trials can engender. Not only did he tell a story to delight an audience that

knew all about officials who sought nothing beyond their own advantage; he used the story to awaken their creativity. This is the classic tale of the underdog who wins without losing integrity or stooping to the level of the antagonist. It is an example of turning the other cheek, which is actually turning the tables so that the stakes are different. She got justice not by convincing the judge of her cause but by making his apathy so uncomfortable that doing the right thing was obviously in his best interests. Additionally, as a Gospel-inspired solution, it was in his best interests not just in the sense of getting her off his back but also in moving him toward the possibility of understanding the value of justice and coming to appreciate it.

This is where the power of prayer comes in. When Jesus tells us to pray without losing heart, he's inviting us into his own spiritual process. We say we believe in the God of Jesus, the God who has a plan for human history. That belief implies that history is on the way to a fulfillment beyond what we can imagine. Only prayer opens us to God's horizon. Praying without ceasing is an imitation of Jesus, who was constantly attentive and open to God's options for the future.

Today's scriptures are directed to people who feel overwhelmed by the state of the world. They remind us that if God is for us, the size of an army doesn't count any more than lack of social standing. These scriptures call us to pray because praying is the only way we can open ourselves to allow God's Spirit to act with power and creativity through and among us.

## **Planning: 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

Our first reading today presents a fertile image for our reflection and for preaching. Moses, who is no youngster at this point, stands on a hill above the battlefield with his hands raised. As long as he maintains this position, Israel does well in the battle. But after a while he tires, and when he lets his hands rest, Amalek begins to triumph. So Aaron and Hur stand on either side of Moses and hold up his hands. You can find numerous artistic representations of the scene by entering "Aaron, Hur and Moses" into a Google search and scrolling down to the image links. (If there are no copyright restrictions, you might even display such an image at the entrances today or print one in the bulletin.)

The key point of the image is not military strategy or magic powers, but that Moses needed help to fulfill his mission. We all need a little help from our friends! Planners and preachers might well reflect this week on the communal and global nature of the church. How can you help the parishioners move beyond rugged individualism and provincial attitudes to embrace the whole church as their brothers and sisters?

This could also be a good weekend to focus on the communal nature of our worship. Despite decades of experience since Vatican II, many Catholics still view prayer and worship as a private affair, even when it is done in the midst of the assembly. This becomes evident if you notice how many people don't bother to sing or even speak the responses, how many kneel down for private prayer while others are still in the Communion procession, and how many leave Mass early — either after Communion or at the start of the final song.

In another realm, that same communal awareness should shape our voting next month. Many issues in the political arena affect most seriously those who have the least. Medicare, Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act are most needed by the poorest among us. Wage issues and tax burdens deeply affect the lives of those in lower-paying jobs, as well as those who cannot work or cannot find work or a job with a living wage. Global climate change is already affecting millions who live on the edge, causing widespread hunger and floods and other natural disasters.

Preachers and planners who hesitate to address such issues might take a lesson from our second reading today: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching"(v. 4:1-2). How can you guide your parishioners, through songs, prayers, and preaching, to make concern for the less fortunate a guiding force in their lives?

## **Prayers: 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

"Hang in there," we say. Today's readings remind us that the call to be persistent in prayer isn't new. Israel needed to hear it, and the disciples were told by Jesus to "pray always." It helps to know that we don't need endless harangues, sophisticated

words or lofty arguments. The God of mercy does hear us. The challenge is to be open to God's answer.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you told your disciples to pray always: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught them the importance of faith and persistence: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to the same challenge: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider:** Answering the call to be persistent in prayer, we lift up now our many needs and the needs of the world.

**Minister:** For the whole church: that it may show us how to pray and stand with us in our prayer ... we pray,

- For those too sick or hungry, too weary or discouraged, too afraid or distracted to pray ... we pray,
- For those whose answer to prayer is not what they had hoped for ... we pray,
- For parents, catechists and all who teach our children to pray; and for those who never learned to pray ... we pray,
- For those of other faith traditions who pray differently or name God differently ... we pray,
- For members of religious communities, prayer groups and individuals whose lives are committed to praying for others ... we pray,
- For those who are too jaded or feel too sophisticated to pray; and for those whose only recourse is prayer ... we pray,
- For those among us who are most needy; for the sick and dying; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

**Presider:** Merciful God, we are grateful that you have always heard the prayers of your people. Show us how to trust in you when we grow impatient, and grant us the gift of persistence. We humbly ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus, who tells us to "pray always." Amen.

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