

The Gospel story for this morning about a judge, this political leader who is eventually brought round to making just decisions because of persistent petitioning might indicate that even lobbyists are necessary even in the Kingdom of God. (NOT!☺) Actually, most theologians agree that this parable is Our Lord's way of teaching us about the importance of persistent, God-centered prayer. In our world, we've developed two different attitudes toward prayer which I believe to be so very wrong. I will call them "Aladdin's Lamp," and "the Gumball Machine." You may remember that in the famous folk tale, Aladdin found a magic tea-pot looking device that, if rubbed properly produced a Genie who would grant the boy exactly three wishes, whatever his heart desired. And so, we treat prayer like some Christmas wish-list. If we're nice and not naughty, and if we want a new toy, then we pray and, "poof" it magically appears, as though prayer is meant to summon for us some Genie from the bottle (and oh, by the way, yes, God, it would really be nice if Genie did look something like a very young Barbara Eden!).



*The Widow and the Judge* on pinterest.com

Or, our prayer life might be like the gumball machine. When you were a child, you will doubtlessly remember these giant glass globes in the supermarket filled with wonderfully colored bubble-gum balls. And, if you had a nickel (though now with inflation it's probably more like a half-dollar), and if you placed your nickel in the slot and turned the knob, out popped your bubble-gum. I get the feeling that if people don't receive *just* what they pray for, they believe either they must have put the wrong coin in the slot, or else they didn't turn the handle just the right way. But if they'll only go back and try it again, The Lord, like some fairy-God mother will grant their wish. But it's absurd to believe that the real function of prayer is simply to satisfy the whims of spoiled children. Is **that** why Jesus died and rose again? Surely our prayer life is should represent something more than simply a conversation between ourselves and a celestial Santa-Clause!

James, Jesus' younger brother responds to some of the early Christians who are complaining that their prayers have not been answered. James says in the 4<sup>th</sup> Chapter of his letter, "*You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.*" You often hear people speaking of the "chicken or egg" dilemma, in reference to a situation where it's difficult to differentiate between a cause and its effect. So we don't really know which comes first, the chicken or the egg. What James has realized is that in order to receive the full blessing God promises us, we have to reach whole-hearted devotion to The Lord. We need to acquire the right, humble, grateful and sincere attitude toward God. That way, we place ourselves in the "spiritual posture" to receive the full richness of God's grace. Devotion and blessing – you can't have one without the other. "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly...*" It was true in Jerusalem in the first century, and it's true here in this congregation today.

So, "*Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*" (Lk.18:1) Other translations say, "*Jesus told his disciples that, "men ought always to pray and not to faint."* In other words, Christians, true Christians don't faint at the first dry-spell. Because the real believer has learned to endure. His or her faith is **that** strong. And so Jacob had to wrestle with the Angel until day-break.

An intriguing feature of Genesis 32 is that part of God's blessing which involved making Jacob walk with a limp. (See Gen.32:31) You remember don't you, how at the end of their wrestling match, God touched Jacob's hip-socket and ever-after the man limped. In fact, when God renames Jacob as Israel two chapters later, The Lord is renaming his servant in Hebrew "He who wrestled with God." Apparently, if we are to be God's children, we must be aware of a least these two things: First, there are times in this life when we are going to be forced to wrestle with God in our relationship with him. But, isn't that the way we become stronger and better equipped to deal with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune this world is so prone to dole out? We grow stronger as the result of our wrestling with our convictions to the Living God. Secondly, part of God's blessing of his children involves a humbling of those children. We have to come to a real (and often painful) realization that our paltry human capabilities are such a meager arsenal of protection to bring with us in this world.

We must realize that we are but limping weaklings in the Spiritual battle that now surrounds us all. (See Eph. 6:12) We desperately need the almighty power of Jesus if we are to make it through this vale of tears. We are incapable of doing so on our own. So, if you're going to be the Lord's and walk humbly with your God, then you need to know that you're going to walk with a limp. There's no way 'round it.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> verse of the Gospel, The Lord says something that I found puzzling. He says "*I tell you, he [God] will quickly grant justice to them [his elect].*" The reason I found this puzzling is because, I don't know about you, but frequently in my prayer-time, I feel fully inclined to ask The Lord to just get on with it! "Lord, why are you making me look for a new job for **this** long?" "Lord, please bring an end to this medical procedure. It's been going on for so long, now." "Lord, can you please help my wife find at least one dress she likes. We've been shopping for two hours!" ☺ Yet, Jesus seems to assure us that God will answer the prayers of his elect quickly.

What I think we need to realize here is that when Doctor Luke records the words of Jesus in this passage, he uses the Greek word *τάχος* (pronounced "*tacos*") to communicate a sense of timing. It's where we get the word for that meter in your car that measures the number of revolutions your motor makes each minute. The tachometer lets a driver know whether or not he is going at a speed which is optimal for the engine's performance. You may find great joy in constantly hearing the rev of overdrive, but you're likely to burn out your engine in record time if you spend too much of the car's life that way. Alternatively, if the tachometer gives you a dangerously low reading, you're liable to find the engine stalling out, particularly on a steep hill. This is the way I understand the *tacos*, the speed with which God answer's prayer. It might not be done with the urgency of this world, but it is my experience that God's answers to prayer always arrive right on time – His time!

As a child, Christmas was a big deal in our house. Sure, my family understood the miracle of the Christ Child, and Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve was a time of great wonder for me. But, I must confess that I used to wait for months, wondering what my Christmas present would be that year; maybe a new bike, snow-skis, or something equally magnificent. But, have you ever wondered what our children would be like if Christmas came not on December 25, but only when a child was really ready for it? What if Christmas morning magically appeared - not on December 25 - but rather in that moment when a child was truly prepared for it in his or her mind and heart. What if Christmas came only when a child was really ready to receive its wonder, and joy, and mystery? Why, you know, if we were all obliged in childhood to wait for the Christmas miracle – if Christmas came to us only through patient waiting, and arrived only when we were finally prepared to receive its full blessing as children of the living God, well we would probably be very different people today, wouldn't we? So, what would we be like if blessings came only when we were really ready for them? Well, guess what? They do! And that is the difference between God's perfect timing, *tacos* and the frenetic urgency felt by this world.

Finally, if the Gospel lesson this morning is about prayer, why do you think The Lord through the pen of Doctor Luke chose to depict his people as a widow? Why should God have chosen a poor, defenseless widow – one of the most vulnerable members of Jewish society – why did The Lord in this passage choose such a weak, defenseless kind of human-being in order to instruct us as to how much we Christians need to depend on the power of prayer? Because, the truth is, prayer is our only certain defense. Oh sure, I learned a lot of stuff in my three years at Seminary. And I've read some really neat books about God, and Jesus, and the Church. But if I choose to depend on my book-learnin', or my human intellect, or any other earthly thing to get me through the dark valleys and rough patches of this life, then I am surely bound for destruction. If you truly want to understand what The Lord wants you to do with those three billion or so heartbeats that he has allotted you, then the only guide you'll always have to hear is His voice. And the best way to shield your life against the assaults of the enemy who is surely out there, your very best guide and stay is a constant, Christ-centered discipline of prayer. So, you see, the prize is out there, this wonderful life of walking hand-in-hand with the Lord. The prize is there, but just like Jacob, we've got to wrestle for it. And so we wrestle, we wrestle until the dawn breaks from on high. And then we become a people who walk no more in darkness, but in His great light.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 9-29-16

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