

If . . . , how much more

Luke 18:1-8

A sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Gospel text today is about the widow who was pounding on the door of the judge. What happened? It says in the first verse that this is about prayer: "He told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." Does it mean we have to pound harder to make God hear us? In Romans 8:26 it says we are like children and the Holy Spirit translates our prayers. What this parable is really about is what God is like and how God works.

In 1987 Sallie McFague, a feminist, wrote a book called, *Models of God*. It focused on models of God the Father and that's what's going on in this Gospel text: Who God is, what he's like, not following McFague's feminist models, but more Biblical models. The first model is that he is the boss. Of course, he is the Lord in the Old Testament. Only fourteen times in the Old Testament is God called Father. Only three times, Mother. The Jewish people avoided any parallelism with the fertility cults. "The Lord" is the one in charge. As Exodus 20:1-3 states: I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, therefore obey. That's the way you are to act. I tell you to do this; you do that, and things will work out. It's like having a job. I'll pay you so much and you do that, and if you don't do that, I'll cut your pay or fire you. If you do better, you'll go up the ladder and receive more. It's a matter of calculations, negotiation, and rewards. It's brought out in Psalm 1:1-3: "Blessed is the man . . . whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. . . . In all that he does, he prospers." You do this, and God will reward you. That is found in its most extravagant form today in what is called the prosperity gospel. If you just do the right thing, you will prosper and become rich. It's a very popular message. We think: That's how God works. That's how you overcome evil.

The second model of God is the one found in the parable about the importunate (persistent) widow. We need to remember the Jewish sense of humor. The parable would make a fine cartoon. Here's this widow who, like most widows of that time, didn't have anything. And here's this judge who, like most judges of that time, was corrupt. He's sitting there and saying unless you bribe me, I won't do anything, and she doesn't have any money. She pounds on his door day and night so he can't sleep, he can't work, he can't escape. She's such a pest! Finally, just to get rid of her,

he gives in. The point of the story is at the end of the parable: God isn't like that judge. It says: Do you think God needs to be bribed in order to help you? No, he's not like the judge. He will help you. He will indulge you.

We have the idea that we want a God who will indulge us. In 1890 the poet Francis Thompson wrote the poem, "The Hound of Heaven." The poet wants to get away from God, he feels hounded, chased like a hunting dog goes after a hare. He flees day and night, tries to escape, but falls down exhausted and turns toward his pursuer. It turns out that it was simply the loving Father pursuing him. We like that image.

There's a saying that goes back to the Fourteenth Century mystic, Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." A happy ending. God indulges us.

It's true that Psalm 103:8-14 states:

"The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love.

He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger for
ever.

He does not deal with us according
to our sins,
nor requite us according to our
iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above
the earth,
so great is his steadfast love
toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our
transgressions from us.

As a father pities his children,
so the Lord pities those who fear
him.

For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust."

But even this picture of God the Father is not adequate. God the Father is **much more**.

The third model is reflected in the well-known place in Matthew 7:7-10 about prayer: "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."

Then it goes on to ask: "What man of you, if your child asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?"

Then comes the punch line: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt 7:11)

"How much more." The wise father. If the three-year-old asks for candy for breakfast, well no! If the four-year-old asks for the keys to the car, well, no! If you who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! **How much more?**

The big picture is **"how much more."** In Romans 8:31-32 Paul writes: "What shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"

He gave his Son that we might be forgiven and have life forever.

We fall into the trap of thinking: Yes, we know what God has done, but what has he done for me lately? He has given us everything. He has claimed us by adoption. He has made us sons and daughters. He gives us life forever, but I want more! I want what I want now!

In Romans 5:6 Paul brings that out: "While we were yet helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly." That's us, the ungodly. Romans 5:8: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Then comes the **"how much more"**:

"Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, **much more** shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For, if while we were yet enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, **much more**, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:9-10; see also 5:15, 17).

How much more than everything is there? He has done it all. That's the way it is. We can only stand in amazement. It's not: O, Lord, what more are you going to do for me?

There once was a magician who came to a high school to perform for the students. But they were surly and sneered at his tricks. Finally, exasperated, he said, "What would you like me to do?" Someone shouted: "Drop dead!" And he answered: "And what would I do for an encore?"

That's what Jesus did. He rose from the dead as an encore. He gave us life. But we still fall into the trap of saying: "Lord, what have you done for me lately?" Yet we have been forgiven and given life forever. Amen