

Proper 24 – 21 Pentecost – Year C – October 17, 2010
Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119: 97-104; 2 Timothy 3: 14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8
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The walk across the desert seems endless for the scorpion. He can sense the water; smell it, even feel its smooth, glistening flow, as it playfully cuts a winding path across the dry and dusty desert land like a child's hair ribbon carelessly tossed on the bedroom floor. The searing sun scorches the packed and arid vista by day, as the scorpion sleeps. Then, as the sun slides out of the western sky drawing up the moon and its cool and sinister glow as though each is connected to the other by a gigantic seesaw, the scorpion resumes his journey. Hours later, the downward swing of the seesaw is complete, and an arc of light etches across the dawn sky with a fuzzy mixture of pink and orange. At last! The scorpion has reached the river. Then with a sense of deep frustration, tinged with anger, the scorpion's tail curls and uncurls spasmodically. He realizes that the river is too wide and too fast moving to cross unaided. Feeling the slight pulse in the air, he sees the causal movement of an otter slipping into the clear water.

"Wait, wait," he calls.

The otter raises her head quizzically, looking for the owner of the strange buzzing voice.

"Yes," she says. "Who is it?"

"I need a ride," eagerness spills into the buzzing undertone of the scorpion's voice. "Will you please help me?"

"Oh, I'm not sure I can do that," the otter responds, effortlessly maintaining her position against the flow of the water. "I've heard that your kind is mean and dangerous."

"I won't hurt you," retorts the scorpion. "I'll just sit on your shoulder and ride across the river." There is a moment of electric silence as the scorpion's words fall from the air and crumple in the dirt. After a little more persuasion, the otter finally consents to carry the scorpion across the river.

The days have dawned and faded multiple times for the widow in Jesus' parable. And still there is no justice for her. As a widow, she is completely vulnerable in society's scheme of things. She has no male relative to take up her cause for her, or she would not have to petition the judge herself. She obviously has no money. Jesus' commentary makes it perfectly clear that if she had had the money to bribe the judge, her case would have been settled quickly. Nonetheless, she has found the courage to stand up for herself, and demand justice. At the other end of this seesaw is the prosperous and influential judge. Despite his disdain for God's commandments and the prophetic reiteration of God's partiality to care for widows, despite the judge's lack of compassion or concern for anyone but himself, we can safely say that he undoubtedly has status amongst the elite of the community.

There is a kind of comic element to Jesus' tale, most obvious in the judge's soliloquy before he finally grants the widow justice. The characters are positioned in the center of a floodlit boxing ring. Ducking and weaving, the surprising widow refuses to go down without a fight. She thrusts her verbal ripostes into the face of the powerful judge, repeatedly pointing out that she has a knockout claim against her opponent. Perhaps stunned by her persistence, the judge is getting very hot under the limelight, and wants to retreat from center stage. The widow is drawing far too much attention. The corrupt judge would rather keep a low profile, where God is concerned. Just like the foolish rich man who built the bigger barn in order to hoard grain for himself, the judge has decided it is entirely in his own best interests to silence the widow by granting her petition. Our feisty widow has been thinking and acting in a way that we would describe today as 'outside the box', which is beginning to get to the heart of Jesus' message from today's Gospel reading.

We could be lulled into thinking that the point of the story is persistent prayer and courage in the face of struggles. Of course, that is Jesus' opening line to the disciples. Yet the story itself seems to go off at a tangent, finishing with the promise of Jesus' second coming, and the curious question, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" We have to look back at the beginning of the whole discourse to see that

Jesus is using the character of the widow as a model of faithfulness who supports and facilitates the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. The judge, of course, is a classic representative of a greedy system that gobbles up the poor and marginalized in utter and complete self-absorption to promote its own foolish ends. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus constantly challenges the social, economic, and spiritual *status quo*. Jesus rejects the injustice of the world's ways, where God's ways are set aside, and suffering is rampant. He clearly condemns the use of money for personal gain, without regard to promoting equality, or care for the poor. Jesus' teaching frequently clashes with that of the Judean leaders who have taken out a franchise on the Law and its interpretation for their own glorification. Jesus embodies His message and mission. Being fully human and fully divine, He can do no other! Jesus is a living testament to faithfulness, to how God's kingdom is manifest in word and deed, to what God's kingdom is and will be on earth, and the way in which we are all empowered to change the world by emulating Jesus' way of being, way of doing, and way of living.

The poverty-stricken widow from the margins of society who refuses to shut up and go away, even in the face of the wall of power represented by the judge, is rather like the church in the world today. In the face of numerous scandals, the church no longer commands the respect it once held, and is consequently becoming more and more marginalized. The Christian way of life is being threatened by a constant stream of cultural invective, powered by advertising, humanism, and secularism. It is harder and harder to live with integrity in an increasingly unjust and corrupt world. This is precisely where Jesus is most prophetic in this story. Whatever we may think is happening, God is in control, and our persistent efforts to live into God's kingdom are not lost. Our prayers are heard. Our loving kindness is noticed. Our resistance of all that is evil makes a difference. Our faith in action, lived out in word and deed, offers hope, one person at a time, in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The otter has agreed to help the scorpion along his journey. We see her glide to the bank of the river, and extend her shiny wet tail inviting the scorpion to climb across her back and sit on her shoulder. Filled with the beauty and amazing grace that truly reflects her creator, the otter smoothly pushes across the current of the river towards the distant shore. Despite the gentle action of her movement, the scorpion remains fearful and tense; instinctively his tail twists into a deadly arch. Quite suddenly, he strikes at the neck of the otter, easily penetrating the dense fur and skin. She feels the violent sting and the poisonous venom beginning its lethal work in her body.

“Why?” she questions. “Now we will both die.”

As paralysis sets in, the river begins to take control of the otter's body, jostling the passenger who buzzes his final response, “What else could I do? Could I really change who I am?”

Rather than succumb to the pressures of the world, Jesus is calling His disciples throughout all ages to stand firm in God's hope, and to persevere in showing the world that there is a better way. The apostle Paul says it like this, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Just like the relentless widow, the comedic hero of Jesus' parable, the kingdom of God just keeps on coming. Change is a necessary part of that coming. The victory is already won in Christ, and the stings of temporal powers cannot overcome God's will and God's way. Quite unlike the scorpion, you and I are created for change and growth. We don't sink to the bottom when the rivers of life swell and overflow; we die to sin, and rise to new and unending life in Christ, through the waters of baptism. As we offer ourselves to God in the confidence of prayer, the Holy Spirit leads us in our growth and transformation into Christ-likeness. As Corrie ten Boom once said, we can “never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”

Amen.