

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

“Itchy Ears”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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29th Ordinary

I was going to tell you about this parable from Luke, about the unjust Judge and the persistent widow who camps on his lawn and wears him down until he does his job. Luke is very clear on the point – that it is about our need to pray always and not lose heart; if even an unrighteous judge can be persuaded to enact justice, how much more will God care for the faithful? So I worked on it, wrote a lot, read over it and realized that I was not interested in it and that you would likely be also uninterested, and then threw it out.

I tell you all of that now, because the reason I was uninterested may get us closer to the meaning of the text than did all my study. The Rev. Lewis Wilkins, perhaps my best friend, went into cancer surgery in Dallas on Friday. His son phoned me – they opened Lew up, took a look, and just closed him up.

This scenario is familiar enough to almost every adult in the room and some of the young ones. There are few who have not experienced the grief and anger of a grim lab report or a seemingly hopeless surgery – who haven’t in one way or another raged against death, for self or a loved one. So I am not saying there is anything special or unique in my mental and spiritual derailment on Friday. On the contrary, this is a place most of us share.

Before this scheduled surgery, Lewis Wilkins and his wife Judy were *going* to be the resource people for the Leadership Development Retreat coming up this next weekend. That will include Session members, Team Leaders, Staff and some others. We have secured a fine replacement in the person of Rev. Pam Driessel from Georgia. And you may hear more about the content of that retreat in next Sunday’s sermon – I’d like to bring the whole congregation into that conversation. In the meantime, this weekend, I have been thinking about Lewis. Having abandoned (at least temporarily) the parable, I turned to the 2 Timothy passage, and got as far as the first sentence:

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it...”

Well, a lot of what I know I learned from Lew Wilkins, and a lot of the rest from my Father, who died a dozen years ago from the same cancer.

At the last Session meeting, the Session went through a short exercise I would offer to you. Who are the significant people in your own history most responsible for the formation of your faith? Those who’ve been in this congregation for years would recognize some of the names that came up that night. Others of us had other saints, people who may not have ever thought to wear that title but who shaped our spirits and our lives. For Timothy it was the Apostle Paul.

In this letter from the Apostle to his young protégée named Timothy, Paul was continuing to be a mentor, to coach a young pastor. It is some of the same advice as in the Lucan parable – hang on, persevere, don’t give up. Paul says:

“Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable...”

a time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires...

I have seen some people get “itchy ears” in times of great grief, times when God has not seemed just, has not seemed to answer prayer. Perhaps folks go off chasing strange gods because they desire a better answer. Perhaps we don’t really understand prayer. Wilkins himself (who may be headed home to Lubbock as we speak) told me Monday that he’d been a faithful servant, and he was pretty sure God would not let him die in *Dallas*.

Prayer is not the coin in the cosmic vending machine – put in the prayer and pull the handle. Clearly it doesn’t work that way – although some with itchy ears may be looking for someone to give them a system that promises just that. David James Duncan writes, in *The Brothers K*,

“When I asked Jesus for a base hit at a ballgame, stepped to the plate and struck out on three pitches I was relieved: If every kid in America could get a base hit just by asking Jesus, we’d all bat 1.000 and ruin baseball in a day.”

How often do we *want* a thing to be true because it makes our lives easier or more sensible? “If it isn’t true it oughta be.” And you can surely find some purveyor of religion who will teach just that, because it is easier and a sensible way to look at the world. Although, it may not be God’s way. And there are those who bend faith to what they wish were true in order to satisfy pre-formed opinions and prejudices. We have spun off more new religions and denominations in this country than anywhere else in world history.

The opposite poles of danger are these – on the one hand thinking that there is no new word for God to speak to us and the old ways will always be best for every time (in which case we’d have racism, sexism and legalism with us forever), or on the other hand, chasing fads. Beware the preacher who says “Here is something shiny and true, and in 2,000 years of Christian history nobody but myself ever thought of it!” (Then check your wallet and make sure it’s still there.)

True faith is surely not the “Flavor of the Week,” but neither can we reduce it to treating the Bible like a manual and simply look up the answer.

I’m reminded, especially this weekend, that Paul could write these things to Timothy because they were in relationship, in critical times. He says, “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it, how from childhood you have known the sacred writings... be persistent whether the time is favorable or not...with utmost patience... even when itchy-eared people wander off...soberly, enduring suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry.” Persistence in relationship.

Likewise the widow in the parable. Seeking justice, she put herself into a persistent relationship with the unjust Judge, trusting that in some kind of time, God will grant justice. She forced an unfit judge to do his job (protecting the weaker members of society) by refusing to disengage, refusing to relinquish that relationship, until he caved in and did the right thing. She would have represented, in that culture and time, the person without influence, vulnerable, without status and yet able to collapse the judicial system by means of persistent supplication. She stayed in relationship.

That should sound a familiar chord to us in Birmingham, locus of so much of the history of the Civil Right movement. Isn’t that what Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and others, did when they time and again

returned to the equivalent of the unjust judge, demanding freedom and justice? Persisting in relationship with the community, the system, the whole church, until it finally gave under the weight of hope and faith? Isn't that what Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu did in South Africa, until apartheid vanished? To keep on praying, to keep on coming, especially when it looks hopeless? Especially when it looks like God is not going to give answer, or at least the better answer we desire? My friend Lewis is continuing in prayer and hope, until God somehow answers, and who knows what that answer will sound like, but you just keep coming.

We also persist in that relationship with God, even in the times when we're not sure who exactly it is that we think is listening. Not a quantitative sum, not how many times a day you pray, but year-in, year-out ongoing relationship. God is not wholly contained in the manual. God is in places we don't suspect or imagine, everywhere. God is near. Perhaps the prayer is already answered, a better answer than we hope for already breathed. And just hasn't arrived in our inbox.

Jesuit priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin wrote:

"By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers."

Or an old Jewish saying goes: *"Days pass and years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles."*

What, then, is my role as preacher and teacher, within the community of faith? Am I to interpret what tradition has determined to be the best answers to your questions? Or am I to provoke you to go in search of the Living God, to look under every rock, in every shadow, for that which is holy? Or a little of both, though the latter is both more difficult and more alluring? It is not the answers to our questions and prayers which will feed our hungers for meaning. It is praying itself, and being in a dogged, refuse-to-quit relationship with the Risen Christ who has promised, *promised*, to give us new life.

Maybe we don't really know what prayer is until we come – like the widow in the parable, like Mandela in prison 27 years, like people you know in the pew or down the street – come again and again into a bad situation with hope in our hearts and looking for the water of life, until you are breathing hope. Until then, it's just wishing. But you come again and again, persistent, whether the time is favorable or not, until your Father who hears you in secret rewards you in secret. Maybe the answers will never be evident, and it's a secret.

Prayer is when you come back anyway to stand and knock, through pain, through fear, through tears and grief, until your knuckles bleed. Prayer is when you're in the dark, trying to get home, and you think, you hope, you pray, that God is there in the dark... and that it will finally be safe to go that way, because Jesus went there first.

Praise be to God.