

Introductory

This material is exclusive to Luke. It is not found in the TLH one-year lectionary, and it is the appointed gospel reading for Pentecost 22C in LW. A very similar story is found in Luke 11: 5-8, which is a portion of the text (11: 1-13) for Proper 12C in LSB. I would perhaps begin preparations for this Sunday by looking at the sermon for that Sunday.

The main point there is the main point here; persistence in prayer will get your prayer answered, a point made with the logical argument of the lesser to the greater; if the unrighteous judge will do what you ask because you bug him, how much more will God, who is righteous, do what you ask because you bug Him, so go ahead and bug away!

Talk in those terms, and maybe even use words like “logic” and “lesser to greater” to engage the brain of the hearer. It’s a good thing to engage the brain, which was built to think, and it thinks all the time, and on Sunday morning we want it to be thinking about God. If you can cause pathos – emotion – in the hearer, that would also be good.

Whenever we talk about prayer, it’s a good idea to review the basics of prayer. As I have mentioned before, a lot of Lutherans seem to think that God speaks to them in prayer. I know they think that, because they say that. He does not speak to us in prayer, and I gently correct the eighth grader, and next week the same thing. She gets it from her parents.

It took several weeks to fix that, but eventually she got it. She’s a smart kid. The person who listens to his own voice as if it were the voice of God, thereby becoming both the one who prays and the one who listens, is actually praying to himself and no doubt is answering himself with his own thoughts. He has become the Pharisee we see in next week’s text.

On that basic level, we talk to God in prayer, and He talks to us in the Word. We have also spoken before about the conversation between us and Him on Sunday morning. When I’m teaching concepts like this, I will often draw a simple arrow up and one down on the white board, but I can’t do that in church because we do not have the big screens, and that’s okay.

Nor do I have a white board, so I use the finger attached to the end of my arm instead. Prayer (arrow pointing upward) is our talking to God and Word (arrow down) is God talking to us. It’s certainly easier for one to talk and listen to oneself. Not surprisingly, self almost always agrees with self! Much harder to expose self to Word and Sacrament.

Because of what they say, I think the inclination of a lot of pastors would be to make sure that everybody knows that God is going to do what He does with or without our prayer, as

we state several times in the Catechism. They might then go on to say that to think otherwise would be to think that we somehow control God, which is what Synergists actually think.

Lutherans are against synergism, but to listen to some of them, you almost get the idea that we shouldn't even bother to pray. The Bible says that we should pray, and it says that our prayers are efficacious; they have an effect. This text teaches that we should pray, and that we should be persistent in prayer. It does not teach that we can control God by prayer.

Teach and proclaim what the text this Sunday teaches and proclaims to us, and let God take care of how the hearers receive and understand the text. God tells us to pray, and He tells us here particularly to be persistent in prayer. He also indeed tells us that He is God, He will do what He wills when He wills it, but He does not teach that prayer is impotent.

James seems to think that it was the prayer of Elijah that was the cause of it not raining for three and one-half years, and then "he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain..." which leads us to believe what James says about the prayer of Elijah. In 1 Kings (17: 21-22), the same Elijah prayed and "God listened" to him and brought a boy back to life.

Most Americans tend to think of prayer as an individual thing and may boast of her active "prayer life." Whenever I talk about prayer, I like to start with prayer in the context of Divine Service. This gives the proper perspective on prayer, and it emphasizes the nature of prayer as fundamentally a collective, corporate act, and secondarily as a private act.

Corporate prayer during Divine Service is the core and fountain of prayer outside of it. In fact, experience has taught us that if a person is not joining together for Divine Service, including prayer, on Sunday morning, he is not praying or reading his Bible during the week. Note that hymns are prayers with music added and prayers are hymns with no music.

The context of this parable is noteworthy. In response to a question asked of Him by the Pharisees in 17: 20, Jesus has been talking about The Second Coming. His talk included the heads-up that there may be hardship and suffering while that event is being waited for. They might even think that God has forgotten about them and His promised salvation.

This parable comes right after that talk, and it is said by Luke "to bind them" to always pray and to not lose heart. The parable ends with Jesus coming back to the Second Coming. The parable must therefore be seen in eschatological terms, i.e. the main concern is that prayer would help to make us ready for that day by engaging in prayer, among other things.

Americans pray for a lot of things. Exposure to the Health and Wealth Gospel has taught them to pray for a lot of temporal and mostly ultimately meaningless things. We need to pray more for the one thing eternal and meaningful. The woman in the parable wants neither health nor wealth. Her prayer is not about physical possessions.

She wants justice, a thing in which Christians believe, even though it often looks to us like it's not happening or going to happen. The prayer of the woman, and the prayer of the Church, the prayer that a lot of Lutherans say every day, is simply "come Lord Jesus" and show us Your Justice. On the last day He will, so do not grow weary" and maybe give up.

With all the talk about "justice" in our country – that's ours too, and we hear the term "social justice" bandied about – it may behoove us to review the concept of basic, impartial justice at the hand of a just judge. In the time of Jesus, justice meant that when a person or people were wronged, that wrong ought to be made up in a way that righted that wrong.

Textual Notes

1. Luke calls this story a "παράβολήν – parable." Go ahead and review the meaning of "parable," and then teach your people something new about "parable." If you have nothing new to teach them about "parable," then learn something new yourself so that you can teach them a new thing. There's always something new to learn about anything and everything.

When you see them lip synching with you that a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning," then you'll know that you are making some headway in educating them about the meaning of and reason for parables. This one is said to be about two things. The first thing about which it is; "δεῖν πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι – to be necessary at all times to pray."

The verb is a present infinitive, emphasizing the connection of act to the person acting. Prayer is to be an intimate and integral part of the life of the Christian. Praying is not optional. It is part of the woof and warp that makes up the Christian walk. Christians pray regularly, and sometimes Christians pray without ceasing – except when you sleep.

It seems to me that for a lot of Christians, the "prayer" app is always open, sometimes in the background, and sometimes you open it up to do maintenance on your prayer life. Regular praying is a good habit to get into; Luther's morning and evening prayers are a good starting point, and we still pray before the meal, even if we're in the restaurant.

Any time is a good time for a word study of "δεῖ." I describe it as "a bad or hard thing that has to happen in order for a good or easy thing to follow." For example, it is δεῖ that Jesus go to Jerusalem to be crucified, after that to rise up on the third day. It is δεῖ that Christians suffer here on the earth, and after that we will enjoy the bliss of heaven for eternity.

It is δεῖ that we pray during our sojourn on this earth, until we make it to heaven. Prayer is not bad, but prayer can be hard, which is why so many people neglect it by not coming to Divine Service. Those same people likely also neglect prayer in their daily lives. If you are not praying on Sunday morning, you aren't doing very much of it the rest of the week.

The second thing about prayer addressed by this parable is the admonition to “μὴ ἐνκακεῖν – stop being weary,” the negator “μὴ” followed by a present infinitive; to stop something you are currently doing. The root of the compound is “weak,” and here and in the other five occurrences in the NT, the idea is that Christianity will take some amount of effort.

The word indicates an inner weariness that manifests itself in outward things; words and actions. The application for the Christian is twofold; corporate and individual prayer. People get tired of coming to church. It can be an effort, especially if you have small children. People get tired of praying regularly every day, and it can be time-consuming.

The translations that say not to “give up” are not wrong, and the word “persevere” comes to mind, as in Christians persevering in times of hardship, the opposite of growing weary or giving up. That temptation is greatest during those times of hardship when it appears that God is not answering your prayer and is this thing on? Hello! God, are you there?

We pray before meals and in church and at other times. We pray for people, for my country, for myself, and for miscellaneous people to whom I have said, “I’ll remember you in my prayers,” and quite frankly, sometimes I just get tired of praying, especially when today’s prayer sounds a lot like yesterday’s prayer and the day before that and before that.

Indeed, praying is about the last activity in which the flesh wants to engage. The sinful flesh wants to do and say a lot of things, and prayer is not one of them. And even in the midst of our praying, whether in church or in private, distractions abound. It is for this reason that we are taught from early on to fold our hands and close our eyes when we pray.

It’s hard, we get tired of it, and here the Law tells me to not be weary of praying. Dobson tells us that feelings often follow action, and if you want to change the way you feel, do something different. It’s true. I say that if you don’t feel like praying, come to church, where the Pastor will do the talking and you can follow along, and we sing hymns too.

I know that a lot of people come to church because that’s what they do on Sunday morning. We do that even when we are on vacation, and sometimes we don’t feel like it, but we do it anyway. I know that for the rest of the Sundays, I’m in church because it’s my job, but for the people in the pew it’s voluntary, they don’t have to be there, but look at that!

2. The scene for the story is set for us; it takes place “ἐν τινὶ πόλει – in a certain city,” and then the first character is introduced; “there was a certain judge – Κριτῆς τις ἦν.” Developing the character, Jesus says of him that the judge was one who was “Θεὸν μὴ φοβούμενος καὶ ἄνθρωπον μὴ ἐντρέπόμενος – not fearing God and not respecting men.”

Both verbs (“fearing” and “respecting”) are participles; it’s an ongoing state of mind for this Judge. This is the guy who is on the island occupied only by self, who does what he

wants without impunity, and who does it for no other reason than that he can. Judges like that were common in that day, and I've seen that sort of judge in this time and place also.

This is the judge who has been given a trust by his fellow men, and who then betrays that trust by refusing to act in good faith regarding that trust and do his job. He shows utter contempt for the society that has bestowed that trust on him. Barclay, who I like because he seems to have a handle on daily life in first century Palestine, talks about the judge.

The judge was clearly not a Jewish judge. All ordinary Jewish disputes were taken before the elders, and not into public courts at all. If, under Jewish law, a matter was taken to arbitration, one man could not constitute a court. There were always three judges, one chosen by the plaintiff, one by the defendant, and one independently appointed. The judge was one of the paid magistrates appointed by Herod or by the Romans. Such judges were notorious..." for being corrupt, and bribery was for them commonplace. Of this particular judge, it is said that he "neither feared God nor cared about (respected) men.

The concept of justice is arguably a part of natural law. Codified laws have been around for a long time, and written down by such as Hammurabi, the Egyptians, and most famously by the Romans. Outside of those and a few other examples, the concept of justice is in the natural man often warped, twisted, or non-existent.

The concept of an impartial judge and the idea that justice is blind is a Christian thing, and even the Christians sometime have a hard time with it. Perhaps it was better in the Republic, but by the time of Jesus the Empire, begun 44 B.C. by Julius Caesar had been working its corruption, judicial included, for over seventy years.

3. The Storyteller introduces a second character into the story; a widow. Her interaction with the first character is characterized with "ἦρχετο πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγουσα Ἐκδίκησόν με ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου μου – she was coming to him saying, 'give justice against my opponent.'" The verb "λέγουσα – saying" is a present active participle; she kept after him.

The verb right after it "Ἐκδίκησόν – give" is in the imperative mood – she is demanding justice. This is all courtroom language, and these are the kinds of words that would have been used in connection to and upon the occasion of a lawsuit. The woman is not actually asking for anything out of the ordinary, and her demands are not at all profound, but routine.

She is simply demanding that the man do his job and make a just ruling which, as we have noted, was actually often hard to come by. Throw in there that this woman is a widow, and she is presumably ethnically different from the Roman and of a different religious persuasion, and in setting this high bar of justice...well, let's see how this thing plays out.

The KJV translates “Ἐκδίκησόν” as a request that the judge “avenge” the woman, and I’m not sure why. The word “avenge” is not included among the 1,500 entries in ROBERT CAWDREY’S *A TABLE ALPHABETICAL* (1604) or even in Samuel Johnson’s 1768 *A Dictionary of the English Language* (3rd Edition), so it must not have been a common word.

The modern KJV 2000 retains that word, while the other translations correctly translate the word with American legal terms. The word occurs five other times in the NT, and it has connotations of justice and vindication and in Romans (12: 19) it is famously used by Paul to direct Christians not to seek vengeance, because that’s in God’s bailiwick, not ours.

The NASB (1977 and 1995) have “Give me legal protection from my opponent,” which is good. The current NASB joins the pack with, “Give me justice against my opponent.” The root word is the common word for things for which we would use words like “righteousness, justification,” and the like. The same root word is found in “ἀντίδικος – opponent.”

4. As the story plays out, for an unspecified period of time the judge refused to make a ruling, simply blowing the woman off. In a moment of self-awareness bordering on narcissism, he says to self, of self, “ἐν ἑαυτῷ Εἰ καὶ τὸν Θεὸν οὐ φοβοῦμαι οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπον ἐντρέπομαι – to himself, ‘even though I do not fear God and do not respect men.’”

If the judge is a Roman, then he likely had some sort of belief in the gods, but to believe in gods is one thing, and to fear them is another thing, and he is not afraid of having to be found wanting in a divine accounting. What he is about to do is not motivated by the fear of punishment from the Divine, nor will he do his job out of simple mutual human respect.

5. But he will do his job out of blatant self-interest, and it is in his interest that the woman stop bugging him. So, he decides “ἐκδικήσω αὐτήν – I will do her justice – ἵνα μὴ εἰς τέλος ἐρχομένη ὑπωπιάζῃ με – because not ending her coming, she should cause me to be embarrassed.” The term has the judge fretting that the woman will “give me a black eye.”

Whether this is to be taken literally or as an idiom I do not know, but there are some women who are able to punch out some judges. The idiom comes down to us these days, and I hear it every now and then, defined, “To damage a person’s (or organization’s) reputation or to shame or humiliate them; can also refer to an organization or any other entity.”

If you think about the origins of the idiom, if you get into a fight and come out of it with a black eye, then everybody knows that the other guy hit you, but they don’t know whether or not you hit him, which is why you always say “you should see the other guy.” But having had a black eye, we know that the physical damage is not great, and it is temporary.

I don’t think the judge was afraid of being punched. I think that he thinks that his continued delaying justice was not good for his reputation as a judge, which apparently did mean

something to him. What God will do to him or what man will think of him are to him unimportant, but for men like this perhaps his professional reputation did matter to him.

6. The parable having been completed, He now speaks to the listeners and tells them to “Ἀκούσατε τί ὁ κριτὴς τῆς ἀδικίας λέγει – listen to what the unjust judge says.” He has said that he isn’t going to do justice by the widow because it’s the right thing to do, but he will do her right so that she will stop bothering him, and possibly to protect his reputation.

It’s sort of like a few weeks ago when the Christian was told by Jesus to learn something from the dishonest manager, and here the Christian is told that he can learn something from a man who is admittedly “unjust.” In both cases it is an argument from the lesser to the greater, a logical argument made many times in the Bible, often of God and man.

Having invented it, Jesus is well aware how the human mind works. One of the ways He keeps the attention of the hearer is to engage the mind by using Logic; the science of right thinking. Besides keeping the attention of the hearer, the use of logic helps to solidify old truths and teach new ones to them. This sort of logical argument is used often by Him.

If God feeds the birds and clothes the grass, will He not also take care of you? If even the dishonest manager can be “shrewd,” then can’t the Christian? If even wicked fathers know how to feed their children, don’t you think Holy God will feed you? The term for that kind of argument is Argumentum a fortiori – “from the stronger thing,” to the weaker thing.

We argue in this manner often without even thinking about it. “Remember the commercial for Life Cereal, the one where the brothers experiment on picky little Mikey? If Mikey liked it, the boys figured, anyone would. That’s an argument a fortiori: If something less likely is true, then something more likely will probably be true as well” (thoughtco.com).”

7. If by your persistence you can convince an unjust judge to do you justice, do you not think that by your persistence you can convince Holy God to do you justice? If that man, who is not righteous, will in the end do justice for the woman, how much more we can expect our God, the epitome of righteousness, to “do justice – ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν.”

He reminds us that we are “ὧν ἐκλεκτῶν αὐτοῦ – His elect,” and we are, and He pictures us as “τῶν βοῶντων αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός – crying out to Him day and night,” and it’s okay with Him – we should be bugging Him all the time. This in contrast to false gods who don’t care to be bothered with the concerns of mere mortals. Our God lives for it.

8. Using apocalyptic terminology, He assures the hearers that the justice sought by the Christian seeks from God will come “in quickness – ἐν τάχει.” It will happen “πλὴν ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐλθὼν ἄρα – when the Son of Man comes.” Whether or not you get justice on this earth – sometimes you do, sometimes you don’t – you will get justice in the end.

The adverb “πλὴν,” in this context, connects and directs us to what has just been said. The conjunction “ἄρα” expects a negative answer to the rhetorical question “will He find this faith on the earth – εὕρησει τὴν πίστιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς?” The premise of the parable is that there is a such woman as that woman, one who is persistent in prayer, who seems to have faith.

The question is; when the day of judgment and justice arrives, will anybody be doing what she was doing? It may well be a rhetorical question, and the rhetorical answer is “yes.” Whether or not we’re talking about the individual praying Christian or the Church, there will always be Christians in the Church praying earnestly to God, and the gates of hell...

The Cambridge Study Bible says, “The widow woman is a representative alike of the Christian Church and of the Christian soul.” In speaking of the widow in the eyes of the world, Bengel, “Such doth the Church appear to the world” as pounding our heads against the wall, seeking justice, but enduring injustice all the days of our lives,” and we do.

Law/Gospel

Unjust/Just – The Christian has traditionally suffered injustice at the hand of the world. In our country not so much. God’s justice will in the end prevail, and the Christian will be vindicated. Another tack that I have often taken on the whole “justice” theme, especially when talking about the laborers hired at different times, is that “it’s not fair” that perfect Jesus should have to pay for the sins of imperfect man, so it’s a good thing that “justice” (as far as we can tell with our small brains) is not done. When asking for justice, the Christian should be careful for what he asks. The justice theme is a good time to talk about the teaching of Justification by Faith, the thing that most LCMS theologians consider to be the material principle of Christianity.

Unbelief/Belief – It is unbelief that would even question the justice of God, and doubts that God would not do justice. It is belief that recognized justice to be a matter of time; in God’s good time and at His good pleasure, on the last day justice will be seen. When preaching the gospel of belief it would be well to remind the hearer over and over and over again that faith also is a “gift of God” (Eph 2) and not of one’s own self. Synergism simply has no place in Christianity.

Persecution/Vindication – This is similar to the justice theme. Christians around the world suffer persecution at the hands of those who work for Satan. This parable is the assurance that they will only be vindicated on the last day and that they should keep praying for that vindication until it in fact comes.

Sermon Titles

Bugging God

Justice Delayed

The Widow and the Judge

About Persistence in Praying

Hymns

The Day is Surely Drawing Near – LSB 508

The Bridegroom Soon Will Call Us – LSB 514

Rejoice, Rejoice Believers – LSB 515

If God Himself Be for Me – LSB 724

How Firm a Foundation – LSB 728

What is the World to Me – LSB 730

Our Father, Who from Heaven Above – LSB 766

What a Friend We Have in Jesus – LSB 770

Holy Spirit, Ever Dwelling – LSB 650

Take My Life and Let It Be – LSB 783, 784

Thy Strong Word – LSB 578

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