

Sermon

October 20, 2019

Proper 24C

The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD

Genesis 32.22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3.14-4.5

Luke 18.1-8

“Struggle” seems to be the theme of the day. Struggles are central to both our reading from Genesis and that from Luke. Both of those struggles are violent: Jacob’s hip is put out of joint, and the judge, in Luke’s story, fears being given a black eye by the widow (that’s what the “delicate” translation “she may wear me out” really means). But is that “black-eye” struggle really at the heart of it all? Or are we called to struggle with the readings . . . and, in so doing, while being challenged, also to be blessed . . . as was Jacob?

I will admit that I had a bit of a struggle with today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel. On the surface, it seems either (a) really straightforward, or (b) really problematic. That is, given the way Luke frames the story, a simple reading yields one of two “straightforward” interpretations like: “It’s good to be persistent in prayer,” or “God will answer prayer, eventually.” Or, it’s more problematically framed: “Why would Jesus represent God as an unjust judge?” When I run into situations like this—that there are at least a couple of possible, even contradictory, interpretations I, like Felix the Cat (for those of you who remember that cartoon!), reach into my bag of tricks.

That “bag of tricks”, in this case, includes a variety of ways of interpreting a biblical text. For most of Christian history, there have been four major ways of understanding, and interpreting, a Biblical passage: literal, allegorical, anagogical and moral. The first two, at least for this week’s reading were helpful. We’re all familiar with the first: “literal”. Simply put, the passage means what it says. So, in terms of today’s reading, there’s a story about a real judge and a real widow—perhaps a first-century Palestinian front-page news-story to which Jesus is referring. And Jesus—and Luke—use the “news” to tell a story about prayer. This “literal” reading is pretty common for this text, regardless of whether or not there was a front-page story,

The second interpretive tool I found helpful was the “allegorical” method. We know this one pretty well too: elements in the story actually represent something else. Jesus is shown as regularly using allegory; you’ll remember, for example, that the Gospels often remark that “the Pharisees realized Jesus was telling the story about them” . . . even though the story didn’t mention the Pharisees directly. In today’s selection, the usual allegorical reading has (in some strange way), the judge

representing God, and the widow representing all of us being persistent in prayer. But, as I said at the outset, there are some problems with a comparison of God with the unjust judge. I mean, does that feel right?

These two traditional means of interpretation were helpful as I worked on this text, but I found some other, more modern tools even more illuminating. And, again, I'm not going to go into all of the various tools. But some of the more familiar ones are "text criticism" and "form criticism". For those of you who know of New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman (I'm name-dropping: he was on my dissertation committee), he really carved out his scholarly niche through text criticism. He was interested in what was "revealed" by differing versions of the same Greek text, i.e., "Why would there be differences?" And, given the differences, which are the most authentic? Now there are some textual differences in our reading this morning, but not much about which to argue.

"Form criticism", on the other hand, does help us a bit. Form criticism recognizes that there are different "forms" in written language. That is, a poem looks (or reads) different from a commandment. A parable has a form distinct from a travel narrative. And, in our passage this morning, there is a parable — we'd know it even if Luke didn't tell us that Jesus was telling his audience "a parable". The thing about real parables, however, that scholars have liked to point out, is that they don't explain themselves. Real parables are meant to make the audience, at the least, wonder about the meaning, or perhaps squirm if they feel the parable hits too close to home.

Building upon the insights brought by both text and form criticism, a number of scholars banded together in the late 1980's and early 90's to bring those scholarly tools together to examine all of the words the Gospel-writers attributed to Jesus, and to "decide" which were things Jesus really might have said. The "Jesus Seminar", as the group was known, would struggle with passages, and then vote on whether or not they thought Jesus really said what the Gospel-writer recorded. The votes ranged from "black" (he didn't say it — the "saying" represents the Gospel-writer's agenda) to "red" ("Yup, Jesus would have said that!"). Of course, between black and red were "gray" (he probably didn't say it) and "pink" (it looks like something he might have said). The Jesus Seminar's book *The Five Gospels* ([Harper Collins, 1996] —Why "five Gospels"? That's for another sermon, or adult class!) . . . the book weighs in on our passage this morning! How do you think they voted? We'll get there!

Also, since the middle of the 20th century, another interpretive tool has gained some popularity. It can be summarized in the implications of the adage, "Only the

winners write history”. In other words, the text under examination generally tells only one side of a story. “But, something’s missing; what is it?” ask the scholars. The methodology, known as the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, has been used to great effect in biblical studies by feminist scholars who wonder how women are portrayed, or how their stories are told (or not told) by the biblical writers. Given that a central figure in the story this morning was a woman, a widow, his interpretative tool, too, was helpful.

So, with all of that as long background, let’s get to it! Take out your bulletin insert, and go to the reading from Luke. Unfortunately, there are no verse numbers, but we’ll make do. Using insights from form criticism, we can see that Luke begins by providing the first part of a frame for the story: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray away and not to lose heart.” The parable proper begins after the quotation marks, “ In a certain city there was a judge . . . “ Form criticism tells us, too, that the parable ends with the words “so that she may not wear me out (or ‘give me a black eye’) by continually coming”. The Jesus Seminar thought the parable sounded like something Jesus probably said, although the precise wording may have differed. They gave the parable a “pink” rating. But, in short, the Seminar thought it genuine!

Then Luke finished his frame with “And the Lord said . . .”. These last two verses suggest one—only one—interpretation of the story: Luke’s. The Jesus Seminar recognized these lines as very representative of Luke’s concern about justice for the down-trodden. Their vote: “black”. If they’re right, then Jesus didn’t add this commentary about God’s “granting of justice to his chosen ones”. And, as they gave the first verse a “black” rating, the set-up of the story as being about “prayer” is equally suspect! That is, the frame may not be the story! To be clear, with all of this “suspicious scholarship”, I don’t want to eliminate our ability to read the passage in the light of prayer, or the persistence of prayer. I just want to struggle with it differently.

Let’s assume that Jesus told the parable as we have it. We’ll take it out of Luke’s “frame” about the need to pray and the concluding, encouraging, comments about God listening to the needs of the faithful. These are, of course, important themes, and I don’t want to minimize them. But, if we leave the parable in that frame, I think we’ll miss something important. So, after taking the parable out of the frame, what we’re left with, then, is Jesus telling a “raw” story about a judge who doesn’t care much about what people think, and a widow who wants justice. Or, to put it another way, a story about someone who CAN make a difference, but doesn’t

care to, being put under pressure by someone who, by all accounts, is powerless to effect change.

We are SO accustomed to seeing this story through the lens of “powerful one equaling God”, and “weak one equaling us”. But the “hermeneutics of suspicion” draws me in another direction: what if we flip the associations? What if the “powerful one” is us? What if the “powerless one” is God? Or, to be clearly “feminist” about this, what if the widow is God, and the male judge—the one cast as careless about what others think—is you, or me? Sit with that a moment.

What would the story imply if WE are the “unjust judge”, caring little for the plight of the marginalized, caring little for what others think? What would it imply if God was hammering at our door, day after day, crying for us to pay attention to issues of justice? This turning the interpretation upside down, it seems to me, is pretty much in keeping with what we (and the Jesus Seminar) know about Jesus’ teaching. Jesus wanted us to upset the status quo where it needs to be, he wants us to continue his work of healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and setting those free who are imprisoned in any number of ways.

Despite 2000 years of Christian history, however, that work of bringing in the kingdom hasn’t been completed. There is still work to do. We might throw our hands up in despair, wondering why God has “delayed long in helping us” (v. 7) — in some ways consistent with the frame Luke has suggested. Or we may recognize the voice of the widow (that is, God) persistently reminding—perhaps with some vehemence—that we are the body of Christ. We are the hands and feet of Jesus on this world that can bring justice to bear. The parable, in my reading, suggests that God doesn’t send down thunderbolts to make things change. No God sends electric shocks through us to bring about change. And we’re all charged to address the issues about which God has given us passion: homelessness, creation care, human rights, etc.

There is a struggle here, isn’t there? There is a struggle implied in the traditional reading; we may have to struggle, or wait, for God’s response to our prayers. But there’s an even greater struggle implied in thinking that it is God who persistently is hammering at OUR door, demanding that we pay attention and do something. The struggle may mean a black eye; we may have our hips put out of joint. But knowing that we will be engaged in the same work as Jesus, know that we have striven with both God and humans, and, perhaps, prevailed, is a blessing beyond compare.

Amen.