

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Ex 17:8-13
Ps 121:1-8
2 Tim 3:14-4:2
Lk 18:1-8

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Life lived in grace means living in relationship with God. Despite our weakness, despite the woundedness of our nature, God loves us. God loves us deeply and passionately; God reveals Himself to us bit by bit; and God desires that we be in relationship with Him. But it is not a relationship of equals. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. He washed their feet the way a servant washed the master's feet. He washed their feet as a sign of how we should love and serve one another. But in washing their feet he did not transform them into the master. No, while humbling himself Jesus remained the master, the teacher, the Lord.

In the Gospel passage we heard two weeks ago Jesus pointed to the relationship between masters and servants. He told us to remember that we are servants and not masters. And he directed us, when we stand before almighty God at the end of our days and again at the end of time, not to rely on all the good things we have done; indeed, he said, the words we should utter are, "We are unprofitable servants; we have just done what we were obliged to do." "Unprofitable servants. . . ." That means that we haven't even earned our keep.

In putting this challenge to the apostles, and therefore to us, Jesus was telling the good people that with God gratitude runs in one direction only: we owe God everything; God owes us nothing. The good people are sometimes tempted to say, "Isn't God lucky to have us on His team!" Well, no, God is not lucky. "We are unprofitable servants; . . ."

Today's Gospel is about prayer. In the lead-in St. Luke tells us in so many words that Jesus told a parable about prayer. And, unlike gratitude, prayer *is* a two-way street. We reach out to God, and God reaches out to us. One of the points the parable makes is that God actually reaches out to us more than we reach out to Him.

The parable has a cast of only two characters: (1) a judge who doesn't care about justice, and (2) a widow with a grievance. In Jesus's time a married woman depended on her husband for her sustenance and became vulnerable when her husband died. This widow was especially vulnerable because she had no man to speak on her behalf in court and had to pursue her claim on her own. The judge here, who is supposed to administer justice, doesn't care about doing the right thing. Instead, it seems he is out to do whatever will benefit himself. She badgers him into doing the right thing. Jesus takes pains to show that the judge remains indifferent to the justice of the widow's cause; he

doesn't experience conversion: she never touches his heart. But she does wear him down. Jesus plainly holds out the poor, vulnerable, but tough widow as the model we should follow. The lesson is: keep fighting for justice, no matter the obstacles. Jesus uses the judge as a negative example, an example of how we ought not to behave. And he makes the point that if a dishonorable and unjust judge can be worn down, how much more will our loving God respond with love to our needs.

Of course God hears and answers our prayers; but that doesn't mean God places Himself at our beck and call. God doesn't grant our wishes. God gives us what we need. God responds to our needs and not to our wants. And sometimes God's answer is no, or not yet.

Parables are one of the ways in which Jesus reveals God to us. What more does this parable have to say about God? As I said at the start: unlike gratitude, prayer is a two-way street. God doesn't wait for us to call; he doesn't just respond, passively, to our requests. Time and time again, God initiates the conversation. We learned two weeks ago that we shouldn't expect God to pat us on the back. We learn today, from the example of the nagging widow, that God taps us on the shoulder and keeps on tapping us on the shoulder until we give in to His love, to His grace, to the way he acts in our lives.

If we but listen, God speaks to us at every turn. As with any other relationship, we can drown out His voice; we can turn a deaf ear. But like the widow in today's parable, He is not put out or put off or deterred. Oftentimes, He speaks through the voice of others. I have a dear friend who delights in tweaking me when I'm less than my best. Sometimes he'll say, "Aha! And you call yourself a deacon!" Sometimes he'll even say, "And you call yourself a Christian!" He's teasing, but there's a kernel of truth in his joking. Sometimes – all too often – I catch myself and say, "My my, you're not much of a Christian, are you?" God is continually calling me to be better and to do better. I just need to heed his voice.

So, two weeks ago we got a Gospel that told us not to expect God to pat us on the back. Today the Gospel tells us, in the person of a poor, vulnerable widow, that God will never ever cease tapping us on the shoulder.