

October 20, 2013 – The 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24C
Genesis 32:22-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

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Don't tell Mrs. Dot, my second-grade Sunday school teacher, but, when I was a child, I often got bored in Sunday school. We didn't have cell phones back then, so you know what I did when I got bored? I used to play a game with my bible. No, nothing productive or useful. Instead, I would thumb through the New Testament, looking for two facing pages that had nothing but the red letters of Jesus' words on them. Pretty exciting, huh?

I always thought that there was something special about those red letters. It's been ages since I bought a bible that showed Jesus' words in red, but thinking about them still warms my heart. Actually, one of the bible apps on my phone will display Jesus' speech in red if I ask it to. I admit that I get transfixed by those red letters. Highlighting everything that Jesus' said in a special color is a not-so-subtle way of saying that those are the most important parts. And, in a way, that makes sense to us, right? Surely the words that came out of the mouth of our Lord and Savior are the ones we should really pay attention to.

Well, this week, I want to give thanks for the words that don't appear in red because sometimes Jesus says something that needs a little editorial explanation. And this Sunday's gospel lesson is one of those instances. Early in the week, I used my blog to post how I was struggling to make sense of the parable Jesus tells in this passage from Luke, and Steve Pankey, a priest and friend of mine from St. Paul's in Foley, Alabama, reminded me to pay careful attention to the first sentence in the gospel lesson. It's not something that Jesus said, so it might be easy to overlook. But it's something Luke added to make sure that preachers like me don't miss the real point of an otherwise difficult parable: "Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

Keep that in mind when you hear the parable and a preacher's attempt to make sense of it.

In a certain city, there was a judge—a rather callous and nasty fellow, who neither feared God nor respected people. And, in the same city, there was a widow, who had been wronged and who kept coming to the judge over and over and over, begging him, pleading with him, to give her justice. Finally the judge relented and gave the woman what she sought—not because he was a man of faith nor because he was a man of principle but because he was annoyed by her incessant nagging. So what are we supposed to learn from the story—to pray always and not lose heart?

What does that say about God? Is he a big, mean God who doesn't care about his people and only answers our prayers because he's annoyed and wants to shut us up? I certainly hope not. And what does that say about our prayers? Are we supposed to believe that the effectiveness of our prayers depends upon the frequency and fervor with which we offer them—that the loudest and most irritating among us is the most likely to be heard by God? Please, tell me that isn't true. So what is this parable supposed to teach us? To pray always and not lose heart? But how?

When I was first dating Elizabeth and getting to know her and her family, she told me some interesting stories about her childhood. One of those that has stuck with me is a story about conversations at the dinner table. Apparently, her father had a habit of saying outlandish things just to see whether the children would believe him. He'd say things like, "Well, kids, we're going to have to move to Alaska where it's cold because the air conditioner is broken and we don't have enough money to fix it." And, as soon as the words got out of his mouth, Elizabeth and her two brothers would turn and look at their mother to see whether their father had been telling the truth. Her exasperated smile always gave it away. The funny thing is that the same thing happens at our dinner table. I say the most ridiculous things to our children, and they immediately turn and look at their mother just to make sure that I'm kidding.

When the disciples heard this farcical tale, they immediately looked at each other and said, "Wait, what did Jesus just say? He's kidding, right?" What does this parable tell us about God? Well, nothing, really. And what does it tell us about prayer? Again, nothing—at least not on the surface. Jesus didn't tell this story to show us what God is like; he told it to make the point that God isn't anything like this judge, which means that our prayers shouldn't be anything like the pleas of the widow.

We know that God is just and that God hears the prayers of his children and gives them what they need. We know that the one to whom we raise our voices in prayer is the one who loves us enough to send his son to die on our behalf. If we believe nothing else, we believe that God is the one who will always take care of us. So why did Jesus tell this parable? Because he knew that far too often our prayers sound like those of the widow even though we're praying to one who is nothing like the unjust judge.

When you pray, are you pleading your case before an unsympathetic judge, or are you lifting your prayers to one whom you trust will grant you everything you need? When we forget that the God we believe in is the God who answers our prayers, our prayers become an empty torrent of hopelessness. We fall into the trap of thinking that the frequency or volume or tenor of our prayers has any effect on their outcome. But that's not how God works. Our God is ready and eager to give his children the justice they seek. He doesn't need convincing or cajoling. Instead, he simply wants us to ask and believe. We should pray to God in faith that God will always grant us what we need. Pray always and don't lose heart. That doesn't mean pray and pray and pray some more because God won't give you what you seek until you wear him down. It means that we should be encouraged because prayers work—not because of the way we ask them but because of the way God loves us. Amen.