

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, October 16, 2016)

Text: **Luke 18:1-8** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Jesus told the disciples a parable on the necessity of praying always and not losing heart:

“Once there was a judge in a certain city who feared no one—not even God. A woman in that city who had been widowed kept coming to the judge and saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a time the judge refused, but finally the judge thought, ‘I care little for God or people, but this woman won’t leave me alone. I’d better give her the protection she seeks, or she’ll keep coming and wear me out!’”

Jesus said, “Listen to what this corrupt judge is saying. Won’t God then do justice to the chosen who call out day and night? Will God delay long over them? I tell you, God will give them swift justice.

“But when the Promised One comes, will faith be found any where on earth?”

Reflections by Pastor Donald: “Speak Up!”

I’ve been thinking a lot about what it means to be a follower for Christ and what kind of voice Christ wants us to have during these tumultuous times in which we live. Where are we to speak up and where are we to be silent? Where are we to be patient and where are we to be persistent and are we to be patiently persistent or persistently patient or both?

The parable of Jesus before us today is one of the wilder ones he tells. At face value, it could almost seem like Christ is comparing God to a most unworthy and vile judge who, as the New Revised Standard Version interprets his words, “neither feared God nor had respect for people” – not exactly the image of God we think Jesus would promote. But reading more deeply into the story, we understand that Jesus is not so much saying that this is who God is, but rather, if someone so vile and earthbound as this judge can be moved by the persistent request -- especially by a person considered of little worth, how much MORE will our God be moved by OUR persistent prayer and petition who may often feel of little worth ourselves.

For as I’ve reflected before from this place, I believe God desires relationship with us – a true, honest, accountable, ongoing and consistent relationship wherein we are speaking our deepest desires, our most challenging choices and our out loud hallelujahs to the One who created us and wants to be sought out and consulted about what’s going on in every area of our lives. Don’t just speak out to whoever will listen, but speak UP to let your prayers and requests be made known to God, “and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

But be forewarned, speaking up to God about what’s going on in the world and in your life will many times lead you to speak up to others as well, as God will often take our prayers and requests and move us to move into this world to encourage others, pray with those who are persecuted and work for justice in those places where we see God’s kin-dom being torn apart by those who seek no relationship with God.

In these days where anger, hostility and degradation fill our airwaves and pervade our senses, our relationship with God is more vital than ever. So many voices call out for our allegiance, asking

us to buy into their interpretation of events as if we had no intelligence or soul. But as it says earlier in Luke, “there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open.”

“Pay attention to how you listen,” Jesus says in chapter 8. And I think he’s talking there as well as here in today’s story about not just being aware of how we listen to what’s being said around us but most especially about listening to God that we may discern the truth and allow that truth to set us free; then speaking UP about the truth that the light may overcome the darkness dispensed by those who can’t handle the truth and certain don’t want it to be spoken.

How many times do we still see those who would seem to be the most powerless in our society finding the will to speak up about what’s happened to them and, with the courage of the truth on their side, face those who the world would call powerful? Just as the woman, a widow, in our story today, their persistence in calling for justice and speaking truth to power allows the light to shine and justice to prevail.

Our UCC theologian, Kathryn Matthews, cites John Pilch writing in his book, *The Cultural World of Jesus* when she tells us that, “the word for ‘widow’ in Hebrew means ‘silent one’ or ‘one unable to speak.’ In the patriarchal Mediterranean world males alone play a public role. Women do not speak on their own behalf.” “So,” Kate asserts, “this ‘silent one’ is acting outside the normal bounds when she finds her voice and speaks up for herself. Maybe it’s because she knows that there’s a special place for her in the heart of God, as the Bible often says.”

Speaking UP and speaking out as God calls us to do, we find a voice – OUR voice – that we may have never known we had. Speaking up when we hear another of God’s children being denied or ridiculed or shamed, we increase our own feelings of worth as God’s children. Speaking UP about injustice wherever we see it, we find others who will speak up with us and actually enable change to come to the world.

Rev. Matthews cites another phenomenal writer and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor who, she says, “gets inside this story and explores the heart of this woman. Society may have told her she was a nobody without a voice, but she knew otherwise, and her persistence helped her hold on to that confidence: “She was willing to say what she wanted--out loud, day and night, over and over--whether she got it or not, because saying it was how she remembered who she was. It was how she remembered the shape of her heart....”

“The shape of her heart:,” Kate muses, “it makes us wonder about the shape of our own hearts and the health of our prayer life, doesn’t it?”

“The ‘how’ to intuit God’s way is the challenge,” writes Dr. Bruce Epperly in his reflection on this parable and persistent prayer. “There are many paths but the simplest and most ready to hand involve:

1. simple prayers for guidance (“show me the way”),
2. listening for wisdom (pausing and noticing and then responding prayerfully), and
3. reflective and open-spirited reading of scripture, and spiritual friendships (opening to the wisdom of mature spiritual persons).

“God is constantly addressing us in ways that deepen and heal our lives and communities,” he says. “We need to listen patiently and follow when we receive enough light for the journey.”

Last week I encouraged you to start each day with a prayer of gratitude. Being thankful for what you’ve been given and what has been given to this entire world by our creator. I hope and pray that you are finding ways to be grateful and to express that to God each day. Through your consistent and persistent prayers, you will find yourself having more and more to be thankful for and your voice

will continue to increase; allowing you to speak up for what you believe, speak up for what you're thankful for, and speak up so that the truth and the light may prevail.

Better Than a Calm Façade

by Scott L. Barton

It's quite all right to bother God!
That's better than a calm façade,
Or resignation of your lot;
For Jesus says the one who's got
The gumption not to knuckle under
Exhibits real faith and wonder
That justice, always, God intends,
Although we may not comprehend
The schedule! Thus, the widow's might
Is in her cry the judge make right -
Which teaches us to fight despair
By voicing what becomes real prayer.

Amen.