



20 Pentecost C 04 (Pr 24)

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

17 October 2004

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:15

Luke 18:1-8

As some of you realize, many of our Gospel readings during this past Church Liturgical year have been from the Gospel according to St. Luke. In Luke's Gospel, we've heard Jesus introduce us to some really odd characters, some of whom—horror of horrors—have been stand-ins for God. We've heard about God being the crazy-lady who throws a huge party after finding a stray penny mingled with the lint and crumbs between the sofa cushions. We've heard about God being the lunatic shepherd who leaves ninety-nine perfectly good sheep to go in search of one lost one—and who upon finding the one straying sheep then throws a party to celebrate – leading the rest of the shepherds to conclude that the party-throwing shepherd has finally gone 'round the bend. And we've heard God likened to an unscrupulous manager who fraudulently writes off other people's debts to the lord of the land so that they will invite him to dinner once he's laid off for his dubious management style. And now today, we have yet another parable where it is apparent that Jesus, not having been to seminary, does not have the good sense not to use bad people to illustrate the goodness of God.

Though this morning's parable is introduced with a piece of wise counsel regarding prayer, this story is most assuredly not about what we do. It's likely that Luke's editor—perhaps a teacher of freshman composition in an earlier life—decided that the narrative needed a transition—and having a few unused index cards in his box, decided to throw in something about our pious works. However, this parable, like most of them, is most assuredly NOT about something we do to curry God's favor. It is, rather, one more parable that tells us what a wonderfully goofy God is being revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

There once was a judge, says Jesus, who was both ungodly and didn't give a flying fig about public opinion. And there was a widow—a person who, in Jesus' time had absolutely no legal, social, or religious standing. She was your basic loser, your basic less-than-nobody. But with more chutzpah than good sense, she hadn't quite figured that out yet, and so the poor dear didn't know that a judge with any sense of jurisprudence would toss her out on her ear the first time—and if there were a second time, the judge would have permanently dispatched this presumptuous loser to some place where she would no longer be heard from. Here too, the presumptuousness of the widow is not about our needing to be persistent—rather it is a detail that helps us to hear how this judge must deal with someone who is not just your ordinary loser – but an obnoxious loser—just the worst kind. But our judge apparently has some sort of a soft spot for obnoxious, loud-mouthed, no-count losers, and he tolerates her coming back time and again—until finally, admitting he has no regard for either godly behavior or human tradition, makes a ruling in the widow's favor—a complete corruption of justice it seems and something neither a normal god nor a rational human being would approve of. And if this unjust decision results in the judge being put out of the judging business, so be it. The judge has simply had it with abiding by the rules—and if someone happens to find this scandalous—tough luck for the offended—they'll just have to stew in their own juices.

It's stories like this one that got Jesus nailed to a cross. The good, fair, and just religious folks of Jesus' day certainly DID GET THE POINT—that Jesus is telling people that the God from whom he comes, the God of Israel, the one and only True God, really isn't any longer into acting like gods are supposed to act, that the Lord God of Hosts is not about to act in the way we all *think* God is supposed to act. "Guess what?" says Jesus, "God is actually a softy for obnoxious, no-count losers—and so God has decided to go out of the judging business—and if you don't like it—tough."

For me at least, it's relatively easy to get up on my high horse and shake my finger at those nasty religious folk back then who preferred God to be a show-no-mercy, hanging judge rather than the soft-hearted God who has decided to surrender his place on the bench. Actually, I'm really good at shaking my finger at a few nasty folk down Colorado Springs-way who I'm sure would be only too pleased for God to continue in the judging business from this day forth and forever more, thank you very much. But I am no different from any of them – I like this unjust, ridiculously merciful judge as long as it's me that's the widow, as long as I'm the obnoxious, no-count loser God is letting off the hook. I do, however, have a list a mile long that I would like to submit to God of those whom I think must receive the full penalties of the law. I most assuredly want God to be the harshest judge in the universe over those who have enslaved other human beings; I want God to eternally damn the Nazis and their ilk; I want God to damn for eternity those who brought some of our ancestors to this shore in chains and left thousands of others dead in the bellies of slave-trade ships.

And, in my spare time, when I'm not making my list of those fit for hell, I like to contemplate my own comparative goodness. And it makes my blood just boil when some clod—well, I guess that would be... Jesus—reminds me that, according to God's laws, I am most assuredly in the same category, horror of horrors, as the most vile Nazi, the most hardened criminal. I most assuredly do not take kindly to the notion of a god who puts all of us into the same category—I don't take too kindly to a god who sees all of us as equally guilty, all of us equally deserving of a divine justice that sends us straight into darkness and nothingness. And upon hearing that the worst of sinners, right alongside of me, receives mercy rather than divine justice—well, I'm not too sure that I wouldn't have been one of those screaming for Jesus' execution. I want a JUST God—I do not want the unjust judge—the judge of unconditional mercy, unconditional love, unconditional reconciliation.

That is, however, the very God we've got—and God doesn't care if we don't like it, if it all seems rather unseemly. God is just going to keep on staying out of the judging business. God is going to keep on being merciful—to the worst of us, to me, and to you—and to our trashy, no-count neighbors and relatives as well. And if you think this week's story about the unjust judge is unfair, just wait till you hear next week's Gospel—no wonder they tried to permanently shut Jesus up. But rather than whining on and on about how none of it seems quite fair—perhaps we should just let the whole thing crack us up—because my hunch is that the unjudging and merciful God of Jesus is laughing up her sleeve—all the way from Easter to eternity.