

"NEVER GIVE UP"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
November 16, 1986

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus once told a parable about a judge, "who neither feared God nor regarded man". And to say that he did not fear God meant that he did not consider the moral laws of God in his judgements. To say that he did not regard man meant that he did not rule with compassion for the poor. Now this detail about the judge's character is significant, because fear of God and regard for the poor were one and the same thing in Jewish Law. In fact, justice, in the Old Testament, is interpreted as compassion for the poor.

And the business of this judge is justice. The proper role of a judge is to make sure that the widow and the orphan, the poor and the oppressed, those without power to protect themselves, were not taken advantage of. Therefore this judge, who "neither feared God" nor had regard for the poor, was derelict in his duty.

DEVELOPMENT

I think we can safely assume that this judge fell into the temptation of favoring the rich and the powerful over the poor and the oppressed. So that when a widow in that city kept coming to him and saying, "Vindicate me against my adversary", we know immediately what the situation was. Being a widow she was without power. And her adversary, undoubtedly a rich man who was her creditor, perhaps her landlord, was moving the court to evict her. "Vindicate me against my adversary" she pleads to the judge. And he refuses to hear her case.

Whether she had a legitimate case in law or not is not really important for the meaning of the parable. The point is that the judge, if he feared God and had compassion for the poor, would be on her side. But this judge is not on her side. What is more, he won't even hear her side. And this is why this parable is called the "Parable of the Unjust Judge".

But, sometimes it is also called the "Parable of the Importunate Widow". A wonderful word, "importunate". It means to plea or to make demands with persistence, even to the point of annoyance. It means to make a nuisance out of yourself in order to be heard. In other words, to be importunate means never to give up.

She is the importunate widow who never gives up in her plea that the judge hear her case and decide for her against her adversary. She is in his court every day demanding that she be heard. And when the judge refuses to hear her and dismisses the court, she follows him to his chambers. When he sneaks out the back door and goes to his home, she follows him there. He tells her to go away. She refuses. She camps on his front lawn, and yells at the house, "Vindicate me against my adversary, you 'so and so'". She's importunate. And finally this judge, who neither fears God nor has compassion for human beings, says, "I will vindicate her or she will wear me out with her continual presence".

That's the parable. And then this "zinger", this punchline: "How much more will God vindicate his elect who cry to Him day and night?"

A PARABLE FOR US

With that you can see who this parable is for. It's for those who have been treated unfairly in life and have prayed to God for vindication and have not received it. It's for those who have cried to God in prayer and have not had their prayers answered. It's for those who have labored faithfully to do the right thing in this world, and

their efforts have been in vain and they want to give up.

"Never give up!" is the message of the parable. For if an unjust judge will hear a widow for her importunity, how much more will God, who is just, hear your prayers? So, the point is: don't give up.

And it's not only summarized here, at the end of the parable - (How much more will God hear your prayers?) - it's also spelled out at the beginning of this text, in the first verse, "He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and never lose heart."

IT SERVES AS A WARNING, TOO

The parable serves as a warning that being Christian does not give you special privilege. We expect that special privilege, at least most of us do. If you pay your dues, it ought to translate into special privilege, like having your prayers answered. We have been led to believe that right relationship with God, which we are granted through faith in Jesus Christ, leads to what could be called an "insider spirituality". Let me continue.

Right relationship with God ought to bring us exactly that - right relationship. We ought to have relationship with God. We ought to be close to God. And as we become closer to God, God ought to be available to us. Maybe not immediately; we don't mind being put on the hold button for a while. But to be reduced to importunity in order to be heard, gosh - that's humiliating for the Christian. After all, what is faith for?

It's common, as you know, for prominent people to have private telephone lines. If they don't do that, they will be harassed. So they insulate themselves from the mass. You can't get to them. They have very private lines.

But there are some people who can get to them - trusted aides, friends, family members. They have direct access. They have the private number. I've known people with access to famous persons. And I've envied them. They can call these people up any time they want to. The famous person won't talk to just anyone, but they'll talk to this person. And if you have that kind of status, you're an insider. Whenever you call, you're going to be heard.

Sometimes, I think, we believe that religious experience, or our conversion experience, our faith, our loyalty to the institution of the Church gives us that "insider status". Now we've got God's private number. Now we ought to be able to get through to him whenever we want. That ought to be what makes the difference between religious people and those people who aren't religious. Our piety encourages that, especially the so-called "Gospel Songs" that we enjoy singing and that talk about relationship with God in terms of intimacy.

"He walks with me, and He talks with me,
He tells me I am his own..."

I'm afraid I've offended people sometimes in what I have said in sermons, but never so much as when I used that song years ago in a sermon...critically... and suggested it isn't always that way. One dear soul confronted me afterwards and said, "Mybe not for you, but He walks and talks with me...everyday". I was sorry I had said what I said. I wished I hadn't said it, because I hate to offend anyone, especially in such matters. And I don't deny that that intimacy is possible, that kind of spiritual oneness. I've seen some who enjoy it, and I have known something of it myself from time to time in life.

But as a Pastor, I also know scores of people who believed, in the spring-time of their lives, when things were going well, who believed in that intimacy. They "walked with God and talked with God" through the garden of prosperity. But who, in the winter, after the storm had ravaged the landscape of their lives, no longer believed anything. They no longer believed that God walked with them. They felt they walked alone.

So, the point I want to make and the point this parable makes, is that there are times in our lives when God's absence may be more real than God's presence. There may be times when God's silence is more real than His promise. There may be times when God no longer walks with you, but you walk alone. And that is the time, dear Brothers and Sisters, when you are to keep on praying and never lose heart.

OLD TESTAMENT AND NEW TESTAMENT

There are many instances where Christian teaching and Jewish teaching coincide perfectly. When the Old and the New Testament preach the same message. And this, I think, is one of those times.

One of the amazing things about the Old Testament is it's honesty about the human condition, it's refusal to turn religion into cheap platitudes. Take for instance, the Book of Job. It stands as a protest against any easy equation of religion with insider status. If anybody was ever an insider, it was Job! He paid his dues. He was a good, righteous man. He kept the law perfectly. And yet nobody ever felt more abandoned than Job. And he never did get his questions answered. He had to go on living with unanswered questions. Job won't let religion get away with cheap answers. That's one of its great contributions.

And read the Psalms. They take God to task for not hearing prayers. They say God has abandoned us. "How long, O Lord. O how long will You turn Your face from me?" More than one Psalm begins that way.

And the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament one feels the same realism. They have the courage to record it and write it down, that the Son of God cried out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?"

You see, the Jews knew all about spiritual endurance. They knew all about feeling abandoned, and never giving up.

ELIE WIESEL Elie Wiesel won the Nobel Peace Prize last month. The committee commended him for his witness of "enduring so much, and yet rising from the ashes to become a person who is concerned about peace and reconciliation in this world".

Wiesel was a survivor of the concentration camps. His father and mother and sister were murdered at Buchenwald, but he survived and began a career of keeping the memory alive. In fact, he's the one who gave the name, "Holocaust" to the Jewish experience of suffering in this 20th century. He's a writer and if you read his works, you know that he wrestles with God - like Jacob - trying to get his questions answered. He never does get them answered.

In the interview last month here in the city, when it was announced that he had won the Prize, he said this:

"I still do not understand why God allowed the Holocaust to occur. I have not resolved the

question. But I have never lost faith in God. I've had moments of anger and protest...but as a Jew who comes from such a profoundly religious family, and because of my passion for study, I never left God, although He may have left me."

That's what I'm talking about. An incredible honesty about the human condition and our relationship with God at some periods in our lives. There's no covering of frustration or anger or disappointment with pious syrup - he comes right out and says it: "I never left God, although He may have left me". Now, I tell you...in some churches you can get in trouble for saying irreverent things like that.

Then he goes on.

"Nor can I understand the silence of the eclipse of God in years when we needed Him most. But that does not push me farther away from Him. I would say that sometimes I have been closer to Him for that reason".

We can learn from that. We can learn what Biblical spirituality is all about. It's not geared for little walks around the garden. It's for those who walk through deserts and go into exiles and have to carry crosses and shoulder burdens. It's honest about life. It says, "Someday it's going to get rough. But don't give up. Keep on praying".

Elie Wiesel is a great storyteller in the Hasidic tradition. He told this story once. He said he heard it in a concentration camp. Three rabbis put God on trial and found him guilty, as charged. When the trial ended, one rabbi looked at his watch and said, "It's time for prayers". And the three rabbis who had just condemned God for abandoning them, bowed their heads and said their prayers.

"He told this parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and never lose heart". That's the first line in this passage. This is the last line. "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?"

LORD'S PRAYER

The early Christians, for whom this parable was intended in the Gospel, were not only faced with disappointment in their private lives, they were also waiting for the coming of the promised Kingdom, the Kingdom that would be initiated with the coming of the Son of Man. "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" They were told to pray for the coming of the Kingdom. They were told to work for it. And they had done that. They had done both, and nothing happened. It still hadn't come.

It was probably that prayer, the Lord's Prayer, that is referred to in encouraging them to keep on praying. Suspecting that, I turned to the Lord's Prayer again. Like many of you, I say it daily. And I say it, I must confess, with a kind of rote. I suppose I recite it sometimes without even thinking about it.

Look at the second petition, "Give us this day our daily bread..." that is to say, give us strength so that we can keep on going. And the fourth petition, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." which means, in this time of waiting, don't let us give up and fall into the temptation of despair, a

despair that will cause us to turn away from You. Strengthen us so that we will be loyal always to You, so that when the Son of Man comes, He will find faith on earth.

It's a prayer for those who have seen a great vision or a great promise. And they journey to it now through a desert, in which there are many temptations to quit, to go back or to give up. That's the prayer, I'm sure of it, that's the prayer that Jesus is referring to when He told them this parable, to the effect that they would always pray and never give up.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

A prisoner of war in Vietnam told how he kept going, how he kept his sanity. He said, "First, I repeated all the poems that I ever learned, all the little bits of poetry that I learned and had to memorize in school. I kept saying those over and over again". And the Lord's Prayer". "I must have said it a million times. It was the Lord's Prayer that got me through. I said it backwards and forwards. I said it from the middle to the end and back again. I remember saying it when they were beating me. And I said it that night when I thought I would freeze to death before the morning came."

The Lord's Prayer got him through and kept him going.

"He told this parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and never lose heart. For if an unjust judge will hear the prayer of a poor who is importunate how much more will God who is just and who is your father, hear the prayers of those who cry to Him".

PRAYER

Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we ask for that measure of faith that will keep us praying even when our faith is burning low, knowing that you hear our prayers even before we cry unto You. Make us deeply sensitive to your presence and your spirit in these moments that each of us may quietly offer a prayer to you for help, for guidance, for courage, for strength as we now face another week in this city. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

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