

Widows, orphans and strangers. These categories, that may seem dated to us - are still live issues. All of these, or their equivalent, are still among us, or at least around us, and likely in even greater number. Women still typically outlive men. Children, along with women are still the most likely collateral casualties in social decay and conflict. More widows and orphans are made every day. And we are all becoming strangers. In addition to all the displaced, migrating and wandering people we encounter on the streets and in the news - we are all more estranged from each other, in this atomized online age - than ever before in history.

Widows, orphans and strangers. This archaic sounding cluster of concerns still refers to real people - while also representing the broader concern of the powerless, the oppressed and the ignored. Likewise, the unjust judge represents the opposite, the uncaring, conniving and self-serving hoarders of wealth and power, in any age.

Today's Gospel seems to throw a weird twist into this perennial problem. Just when you might think you have Jesus figured out, he drops another story-bomb. A woman pounds on the door of a rotten uncaring politician, who eventually relents and gives her what she wants - *just* to get rid of her. Is the message or advice simply to be a pest to get what you want? Ask long and hard enough and if even a corrupt judge will relent, then surely, if you persist in asking, God will also grant you whatever you ask, including even - justice.

A surface reading might end there - a brief victory for the feisty downtrodden - also fulfilling the fundamentally pagan ideal of religious seeking and getting, or reward.

We are also amused, as the original audience would surely have been, at these caricatures of the feisty widow, the downtrodden, one of our own, annoying this smarmy public figure until he does something good - in spite of himself. We respond as they would have - feeling that things are bad, but what delicious relief to revel at least momentarily, in such satisfying turnabout and comeuppance.

Then, we realize - now that Jesus has our attention, that he is really telling us what prayer is like. And we suddenly have a bit of a problem, because it certainly seems that we can hammer away at God's door all we want, - but it really doesn't seem to alter the course of reality, or determine events.

Prayers are not always answered - if by answering we mean fulfillment of our specific requests. Personal problems, not to mention disasters, both natural and human, disease, death, and injustice, all keep on coming. If we're honest - our people are not feeling relieved.

We need to pull back to see that this story is reminding us of the fundamental - that God cares about those things - and especially those people - we deem unimportant.

We often wonder - and cannot often know how this caring plays out or works, but neither can we doubt it as a principle. Nothing else makes sense if we hold to the notion of a creator God - who is by definition a loving God - unless we want to insinuate that creation was either a failed project, or a sadistic act. We cannot sensibly read the history of human folly and horridness back onto God. Neither can we project some lesson plan of God's onto the injustices, crimes and inequities that litter the human story.

God is indeed great. But that greatness lies not in any capricious power to alter events, conditions or the intentions that produce them. Whether or not God has that ability, it would be merely an excess of relative power, a way of contending, dominating or winning - the kind of things *we* seem to like - that are *not* reflections of God's image.

Like many parables, this one is double edged, calling the powerful to repentance while offering hope to the oppressed - who are reminded again that God, who desires only our thriving unto salvation - is nothing like the unjust judge.

The call to prayer is a call to hope and a call to hopeful action. For those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow, orphan and stranger - and do not - the call to pray night and day is really a command to reorder their priorities and align their lives with God's redemptive purpose.

God's greatness lies in God's willingness and capacity to create, sustain and permit the fullness of what creatures can be: - and that requires that their intentions and actions really have meaning - even if the impact for good is not always obvious or forthcoming.

What would virtue even mean if the deck was loaded and the virtuous always had privileged access to all the wild cards so that their best intentions always prevailed. What would good even mean if the good always won - automatically? If nothing of real consequence is called for - from us - are we even properly human? Could we ever hope for any more than a shallow and flickering sensation of real life if our moral role was artificial? What would moral and ethical outcomes even mean without actual skin in the game? God created, not in some sanitized holy vacuum - but from the very heart that is the source of all wisdom, God made all things, including creatures in God's own image. How could those creatures not have real agency?

Our intentions and our actions have to count - they *have* to mean something, for *any* of life to reflect love back to God - which is the purpose for which we were made - and which nothing can surpass as our fulfillment and joy - if only we let it, or better, seek it.

When Jesus asks - *when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth* - he really urges us to pray without ceasing. And while this prayer certainly includes pious concentration and religious ritual - it should be obvious by now that prayer is really meant to encompass *all* aspects of life - manifesting in living habits of purpose and compassion.

Jesus also knew, and knows, that it is easier to worry about our personal piety than to engage our concern for the well being of those broadly represented by the widow in this story. Jesus anticipates our dilemma, and turning the tables, urges us to cease speculating about the timing and nature of his return - and live into our calling to let prayer shape our lives.

If the Son of Man is to find faith on earth, we must understand our prayers not as so many unanswered pleas - but as our participation in the hope of the coming reign of God.

We are called to live not as if God has abandoned the world, nor as if like the unjust judge, God ever would forsake God's own creation. We are called to live lives of hope in action - assured again that this living prayer is both our rightful worship and our life-giving link to our maker and lover of our souls.

And to be clear, by soul, I mean embodied, active, souls. In truth, the problem lies in our ignoring the world - which is almost always easier than paying attention - at least in the short run. Even John Calvin recognized, and said, that we cannot separate who God is and what God does - from who we are, and what we are called to do.

In an important sense - we are what we do - because that is what has the most impact on others, and on the state of the world that we and others also live in. We do not live in a time when this is easy, or where the pathway is always, or ever, clear. But we do know that to the best of our discernment we are called to the good - in principle and in action.

The real issue here is justice - not the petitioning of God to get what we want. And as we also pray - God knows our needs before we ask. We pray for the clarity to know, and the strength to do, God's will.

And we pray for the grace to live and to find our peace even as we face into the winds of injustice - believing God - and trusting that with our cooperation and our participation, we, and those inheritors of the earth who follow us, may indeed sing:

*Hast thou not seen - how thy entreaties have been, - granted in what He ordaineth?*

Jesus' call to faith is a call to the life of prayer that participates - committed to his coming day - every day.