

FAITH AND JUSTICE

Pentecost 22 – Cycle C: Luke 18:1-8

This past Tuesday, 25 of our members and friends gathered in Roy Grosz Hall to celebrate the Confirmation of McKenna Andrews. The 25 included McKenna's family, three of our present confirmands and their families, our Youth Minister, Alicia, Conrad and Sue Knabenschuh on behalf of Church Council, and Paula and me.

As you may know, the congregation gives gifts to those who are ready for the rite of confirmation or (as in McKenna's case) have been recently confirmed. The gifts are typically things that are both symbolic and instructive concerning the life of discipleship. McKenna's gifts were no exception. She received a large heart made by artisans in Kenya – a reminder of Jesus' command to his disciples to love one another. She received a small candle set in an onyx candle holder made by artisans in Pakistan – a reminder that she carries with her the light of the gospel in a world whose darkness is caused by too little love, not enough justice, and a lack of peace among people and nations.

Both gifts were fair trade items, embodying the message they symbolized. And she received a Canadian book entitled *If the World Were a Village* to remind her that our love for one another and the light we bear call us into a solidarity with all people, the majority of whom are, on the surface, quite different from us, but also who, when we compare our humanity, are very similar to us.

This book envisions the whole world as a village with only 100 people in it. And then, analyzing what life is like on our planet, it shows how well or how poorly these 100 people live. The book was intended to keep alive in McKenna Jesus' call to his disciples to connect their love for one another and their love of the gospel with the need for justice in the world; and to look deeply within ourselves and then into our communities both for the root causes and the solutions to injustice.

The book is not preachy or moralistic: it merely begins a conversation with the reader showing how many in this village of 100 live. Because it is a Canadian book, I expect the author assumes that his readers will bring a Canadian or North American perspective to what they read, and will find it alarming, for instance, to learn that in the 100-person village that is the world, 80 would live in substandard housing, 50 would suffer from malnutrition, and 33 would not have access to clean, safe drinking water. We talk a lot in confirmation classes about making faith practical, about getting the words of the Bible off the page and becoming the good news of God in the world ourselves. In the end, however, we must turn everything over to (1) our confirmands and their families to keep the gospel as their guide throughout life, and (2) to the community that is the church – both this congregation in which they are, at present, members, and the larger church, that building-less, wall-less community of believers worldwide in which the word of God is proclaimed in its purity and the Holy Sacraments are rightly administered.

Today's Gospel addresses all who are gathered in families, congregations, and in the global church with the mandate of loving one another, bearing light in the darkness, and doing justice. Luke introduces a story told by Jesus as a parable about the need to pray always and not lose heart. The story itself, though, is a story about a woman seeking justice; how a judge who has the capacity to grant her petition is not the least bit interested in doing so – because, we learn from Jesus, he neither fears God, nor respects anyone. The woman doesn't give up, though, and at length, the unjust judge grants her the justice she deserves, not because he was persuaded by an argument she presented, but essentially because he wanted her to go away and stop bothering him.

Jesus spins the story in such a way that we identify with the persistent woman and understand the judge to be a poor substitute for God. In fact, Jesus acknowledges that God is nothing like the judge: God is a just judge who, Jesus teaches, does not make people wait. It's easy, he tells the disciples: prayer opens the door to God's blessing; prayer is a means of grace.

But then there is the matter of justice: how are faith, the faith that prompts us to pray, and justice related? All we have to go on, really, is Luke's introduction, suggesting that Jesus' followers were struggling with prayer because they were losing heart. If the two things are related, and Luke would certainly have us believe that they are, then Jesus' followers must have been struggling, not only with praying, but also with justice. Perhaps they were poor, perhaps they experienced the same kind of criticism Jesus received from the religious authorities. We can only speculate.

What is less speculative is that Luke wants the readers of his own time who were, quite possibly, subject to persecution from several quarters, to place themselves inside this parable. Whether the stories of Christian persecution are accurate or not, there is certainly anecdotal material indicating persecutions and martyrdoms of the followers of Jesus in the first three hundred years of the history of the church. Even allowing for exaggeration of these accounts, the Christian community would certainly have felt that their environment was hostile. Jesus' story in Luke's hands would have been comforting words and provided inspiration for the members of the apostolic church not to give up; to keep praying and affirm their faith by so doing. Jesus proclaimed God's compassion for all who stand in need. Among the community of believers, his words would have had authority.

In many countries around the world, Christians are still persecuted. Especially in countries in which the government is a theocracy, that is, a government sponsored by a religion – in this example, a non-Christian religion – in these countries, Christians are typically considered enemies of the state; Christianity is illegal; to be a Christian is to risk imprisonment, torture, or worse.

Tragically, this parable in the hands of Luke, still has its original application, 2000 years later. Christians are the most-targeted religious group in the world today. The UK's Christian missionary organization, Open Doors, publishes a list each year of where and how many Christians are persecuted worldwide. In the January 15 edition of the *Christian Century*, Lauren Markoe wrote that Open Doors estimates that in North Korea 70,000 Christians are being held in prison just for being Christian. She notes that if you are caught carrying a Bible in North Korea, you are executed. She also reports that the statistics rose in 2012 worldwide.

Christians in North America and Europe are removed from this horrifying reality. We are free to worship and speak out and recruit new members any time, any place. And, in fact, general indifference to the Christian community is more typical of the Canadian experience. Unless we are acquainted with Christian persecution in other parts of the world, we have to stretch to identify with the issues Jesus' parable raises.

And so, let us consider faith and justice and the woman in the story. Is she in danger of losing her faith because of whatever injustice she has suffered? Clearly not, as Jesus portrays her as wearing down the unjust judge. She is exceptional, we learn from the story, for her courage, her persistence, her faith that, even against all odds, she will receive justice. In the story, faith and justice are two sides of the same coin; they are one and the same; they are embodied by the woman. Her faith in a God who is, above all just, is revealed in her persistence. Her faith in the just God is such that it allows her to transcend the present reality of an unjust judge and the unjust world in which she has been harmed.

What I see emerging from this story in our hearing is a message concerning the integrity of Christianity in our hands: that we are, in a sense, placed in the position of the unjust judge, hearing the cries of injustice all around us and, for the most part, struggling to respond. We have voice in our free society to speak out when we see injustice in our community, our country, and the world, but we are amazingly quiet. We're not completely compromised – the sweaters and the food in our Narthex indicate we're not dead yet – but we can do better. And the message from this reading of Jesus' parable is that we must do better, if faith is to be understood and valued first of all within our community, and then by others. We need to walk the talk of the gospel of Jesus Christ or its meaning and value and ultimately its integrity will be forgotten.

McKenna's three gifts remind us of who we are as disciples of Jesus. The big red heart from Kenya reminds us that unconditional love is the central value of Christianity. The lighted candle reminds us that many in our world are without faith and that our light of faith must not be kept covered over, if people are to learn of God's faithfulness, God's goodness. But the third gift, today's story shows us, the book on how we live with one another as the people of God, is indispensable. It symbolizes the prescription for discipleship in our time and place. It signifies the practical application of our faith. It asks the question, "In the world that is a village, do we find ourselves on the side of justice?" And then, "If so, are our efforts conspicuous enough that faith can be understood as married to justice?"

Another way of putting it is the old question, "If we were accused of being Christians, would there be enough evidence to convict us?"