

Guest speaker Lisa Larges, from “That All May Freely Serve”

October 11, 2009

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

Title: “Re: Marketing Memo: Nix the Justice Talk”

A few years ago I made a decision not to use the word justice – not in sermons, not in talks or newsletter articles, or any other sort of public communications. Here’s what I was thinking.

First off from the public relations point of view, “justice” in our polarized society has become a code word for liberal. “Social justice,” “peace and justice,” and such phrases are coins of the left. When you hear someone going on about justice, in all likelihood, what you have in front of you is a liberal – and probably an old liberal.

The word itself has become so encumbered by its association with a particular world view, that it distracts from its core meaning. Anyone from, oh, let’s say, Intercourse Pennsylvania, for instance, knows just how otherwise perfectly harmless little words can dredge up far too many unwanted associations.

Second, in my work advocating in the church for fair treatment and welcome of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in the life of our Presbyterian Church, the word “justice” is often deployed, but it isn’t quite an accurate descriptor for what we’re seeking. I think what we’re asking for is “fairness” – the same rights and responsibilities conferred on us at baptism as to our heterosexual sisters and brothers. Fairness is just halfway up the block to justice. Justice involves accountability, a redress of wrongs, and a penitential spirit. Lgbt persons are simply asking for a place at the table. Once we have that, then maybe we can sit down together and talk about justice, but let’s just take this one step at a time!

Thirdly, I realized, that where ever I may have spoken of justice, I could speak of love instead. In my own life I have learned, however slowly and painfully, that if I want to live justly, all I have to do is love rightly. Justice, especially the full-throated robust Biblical justice that the Psalmist cried out for, and with which the Prophets burned, and the Rabbi’s including one named Jesus, infused in all their teachings, rests on a foundation of love. If it’s this justice that we seek, then we need only practice the fundamentals: loving our neighbors as ourselves, and loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength.

It’s not easy being a preacher with a self-imposed embargo on the word justice. Here for instance, is a story of a widow who has been treated unjustly, and a judge who’s only identified characteristic is that he cares not a lick for justice. But, whether or not we use the J word, it’s hard to know what to make of this parable.

Surely the point of the story can’t be, though it appears to be so, that we’re not bothering God enough! Is God so omnipotent, so accustomed to the routines of running the universe as to hang out a big sign that says, “Nag me!” Not even God could want that!

What’s more, the Gospel writer sums up the parable by saying that we ought always to pray, and not lose heart, when losing heart is just what we’ll do. We know it even now, in spite of our good intentions and resolve to do otherwise. It’s part of our human makeup. Doubt and fear find their way in. We grow weary, uncertain. We will begin to complain. Then we will chide ourselves for

doing the very thing we'd determined not to. If only the Gospel writer had introduced this as a parable that reminds us to pray even when we lose heart. That will be difficult enough, but at least accounts for our human frailty.

Or, perhaps it is that the Gospel writer erred in recording the parable as Jesus originally told it. Truly it would be more comprehensible if the roles in the parable were switched. If we were the judge, and God the widow, that would be in line with what we know of God's nature and our own.

For Jesus, as Paul writes in Philippians, though having the same nature with God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.

Indeed, this is how God comes to us. Even as a widow, the lowest of the low – the bottom of the social strata – emptied of everything, without resources, without standing or connection, without any powers of coercion, without guile, or fancy words, or anything at all. For God, Paul again, chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of this world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before God.”

And, wincingly, I find my own character mirrored in that curmudgeon of a judge. I know what it is to be badgered by God. I have had that experience, far too often, of hearing within me that still small voice, and resisting, and resisting, and resisting and resisting until I give in, not because I have become convinced that God's way is better than my own, but only that I have at last exhausted myself, and grown so weary of fighting that I at last yield to God's persistent entreaty.

Reading the story in this upside down way is almost a comfort, at least it is to me: as it confirms my experience: my own human tendency to want to choose my own way, and God's unending, untiring perseverance in calling me, over and over and over again to walk instead in God's way. We are provoked by grace in to goodness. Isn't it so?

So it is vexing that the parable has come to us in the way it has. As we have it, God is cast as the old crank of a judge, and we are urged to be like the tireless widow, unafraid to be bothersome, indeed, maybe even reveling in it!

This is one in Jesus' series of “How-much-more-so” stories. If God cares for every sparrow that falls from the sky, how much more so will God care for you. If a human parent seeks the welfare of a child, how much more so will God, who is our heavenly parent care for us. If such a judge as this one, who is indifferent, even hostile to appeals to justice, should yield to the widow's entreaty, how much more so will God, the author of justice hear our cries

Jesus employs this device, because, if he told us straight up, we would be disinclined to believe him. Justice comes about because we pray for it? As though our lives, the world, and all we care about depended on it? As though what we say to God in the quiet of our own minds and hearts, or those sighs too deep for words, or the prayers we offer as we come before God together in worship, or seated in a circle, or across the kitchen table, represent the best, if not all, of what we can do to make this a better world?

That through that sacred conversation -- sometimes anguished, sometimes punctuated with a pouring out of all of our fear and rage and accusation and doubt, sometimes marked by long silences – silences of our own or of God – sometimes sweet and languid and desultory like the conversation between old friends -- that through that sacred conversation we are changed and the world is changed? Apparently, according to Jesus and his parable, that's all there is to it.

Were I sitting where you are right now, listening with mild interest to such a sermon which is winding around to say something about prayer, I would be thinking, "That's all very wise and very pleasant, guest preacher lady, but where does the gay part come in? How is this a sermon, as it says here in my bulletin for our observance of National Coming out day; what bearing might this have on the controversy I've read about in the Presbyterian Church regarding the place of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in the Presbyterian church? What, dear preacher lady, do you have to say about that?"

I say that this is what I would be thinking, were I where you are right now, for you yourselves are far to well-mannered and gracious to think such thoughts.

Well, I come here to tell you I don't know. After 25 years as a candidate for ministry, stalled in the process because I have been open about who I am as a lesbian woman, after seven years of traveling across the whole church, talking and teaching and preaching, and listening, and reflecting, after 46 blessed revolutions around this planet, all of them spent in the Presbyterian Church, I tell you only that I no longer know. Maybe there was a time when I thought I knew, but I didn't know then, and I have only grown confirmed in my unknowing. I don't know how we will resolve our differences. I don't know how or when, or in what manner we will reach some equitable resolution as to the question of the right of each person who is called to serve to be considered for Ordained office, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. I don't know when the day will come when our churches will graciously extend due consideration to any couple seeking to solemnize their love in the covenant of marriage. I don't know how to stop the fighting, heal our wounds, find our way through.

I know only that all that is left to us is to lay it before God. For me, in my walk of faith, as a Lesbian woman seeking to be Ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, and as a partisan advocate for lgbt community, it means gathering it *all up – my love for what the church is and can be, along with the anger, the hope, the heartbreak, the anguish, the small victories, and hard losses, and sudden joys, and inevitable conflict, and my dreams for all that the Church could be and do, and all the myriad host of inchoate feeling and half-formed thought – and set it all before God, and say, "Here it is. Here am I. Teach me your will."*

Presbyterians have been fighting about lgbt issues for thirty-five years now. Presbyterians, for we are a feisty bunch, have been fighting a lot longer than that, but our public fight about equal treatment for gay and lesbian persons has consumed the better part of 4 decades. And the Presbyterian Church is sadly, and disappointingly, a microcosm of our country. Church politics, it turns out, aren't so different from Civil politics, accept perhaps only that they are less civil.

What if we were known more for our praying than our fighting. What if our gift, and indeed, our covenant, to one another, to our Church, our community, our country, and our world were to gather it all up and carry it to God. What if we understood prayer to be, as petition was for the widow, our only option.

What if God, the Holy of Holies, author of creation, ruler of the universe, the alpha and the omega were even now holding out a sign that said “Nag me. Bring it on.” What if we heard again the voice of the Holy One, calling through Scripture, saying, “Turn to me. Seek me day and night. And all the rest will follow.”

As the widow, unabashed and undeterred, persisted in bringing her plea, so may we persevere in prayer, until that day when we know only love, and love breaks forth in justice.