



Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (C)

Luke 18: 1-8

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+O God, strengthen our faith and open our hearts to follow you without reserve, today and every day. Amen.

American higher education has changed dramatically over the past several years. Colleges and universities are obsessed with ‘outcomes.’ There are institutional outcomes, department outcomes, program outcomes and course outcomes. All those outcomes are mapped together and have to somehow flow from the institution’s mission. Now, it may not sound so important but all those outcomes are highly valued by accreditation bodies.

In my position at the college where I work, I deal with program and course outcomes nearly every day. As I develop a new online course or oversee another faculty member’s development of a new course, the course outcomes and the weekly outcomes drive the teaching and learning experience. I’m surprised that I don’t have even more gray than I do. Outcomes can drive one crazy no matter how important they are.

Truthfully, there are outcomes just about in everything in life. Think about it. Decisions are made in every arena that are guided by certain principles. They are guided because particular outcomes, desired objectives, need to be achieved to help guarantee success.

Think about the successful rescue of the miners this past week. Thirty-three men under the earth for sixty-nine days were rescued one-by-one in a capsule 22” in diameter. I can hardly think of a more galvanizing event where people all over the world watched, hoped and prayed. Hundreds of people put their heads together including Nassau scientists to bring about an outcome of something thought almost impossible. The hopes and prayers of countless millions of people as well as the miners and their loved ones were answered.

The hopes and prayers of the woman in our Gospel story today were answered. The judge ruled in her favor to get her ‘off his back.’ He didn’t rule in the name of justice, as he was a man who “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” What is positive about this story is that justice was done in spite of the reason for the judgment.

Interestingly enough, the Jewish judges in the First Century were really not so concerned about the welfare of the poor, a widow or those unfairly treated in life. They were the ‘scribes’ who were in place to protect the political and religious system of Jewish law. They interpreted Torah, the first five Books of the Bible, not so much for justice sake but to maintain the political, economic and religious system of the day.

Jesus used this parable to point out that system, to teach how God is the ‘just’ judge and to show that an authentic relationship with God is marked by persistence in prayer.

Prayer is a hallmark of a meaningful relationship between an individual and God. It is an outcome of one's faith. Isn't it remarkable that when we seem to need God the most, that's when we pray the most, that's when we desire to be the most connected to God?

For those of us involved in the pastoral ministry of the sick or those in mourning, we often see people in great need of God's mercy. We sometimes see people who may not have prayed for years suddenly turning inward to look for answers, for solace, for comfort, for understanding, for God.

What I think is remarkable in today's Gospel is that the woman was persistent. She kept up her quest. She didn't let go. She persisted until she was heard and her problem resolved. Her *faith* gave her the will to persist.

You and I are invited into a relationship with God that is nurtured and sustained through faith. Prayer nurtures that relationship. Prayer teaches us the discipline to be diligent in our connection with God, a connection that results in all kinds of wonderful benefits.

I have to admit that there are people for whom I've prayed much of my life. I believe that God hears my prayers, and how much I wish that God would answer my prayers when *I* want them answered. That's just not how it works with God. God is there for us, 24/7, and invites us into relationship, 24/7.

In passage after passage of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, we are told that God is faithful, that God is loving, kind, generous, comforting and understanding. If we are not in relationship with God through faith and prayer, the ability to stay connected with God is not easy. How can we experience God's love, kindness, generosity, comfort and understanding when we need it the most, if we are not in relationship with God through faith and prayer?

We know that churches throughout Europe even Italy have been nearly empty for a generation. People have seemingly given up on prayer.

The New York Times recently interviewed people who had stopped praying and going to church. A large number of them indicated that prayer seemed irrelevant and useless. Pretty clearly, there's a relationship between faith, prayer and the Christian life that either flourishes or dies.

Perhaps, one of the great challenges in our busy, instant gratification lives of cell phones, texting, Tweets, and the internet is that a relationship with God needs commitment for the long-haul. We can't just go in and out of it and expect results. Relationship with God needs tending just as a relationship with a spouse, a partner, a child or a dear friend needs tending. As God cares for us, so, too does God long for us to care about God.

How do we commit ourselves to be in relationship with God? Parents and grandparents, how do you teach your children to be in relationship with God? How do we help children and young people see through our example that faith, prayer and the Church are all somehow wonderfully interrelated?

When those rough times in life happen, and they do happen, then, we have our faith to fall back on, a faith that we have nurtured through prayer, through hearing and reading the Word of God and intimately connect with God through the Holy Eucharist that we will soon share.

Ours is an awesome legacy. We have been tended and loved by God every day of our lives. How *we* connect with God in life-giving and meaningful ways is up to each of us and also to us as a faith community.

We are here as an expression of our faith, and we believe in God's overwhelming and abundant love for us. Here, we nourish and sustain our relationship with God and God's people sitting all around us through our prayer together.

What a holy task! What life-giving potential! What faith for which we are truly grateful! Amen.