

Sermon – Proper24 – Cathedral of the Incarnation

October 16, 2016

The Widow, the Unjust Judge and Just Mercy

The psalm (Psalm 121) set for today is a psalm that has brought great comfort to many people across the last 1,500 or so years. I've prayed this psalm with people often. There is something comforting in the image conveyed by the words. I am vulnerable in this world trying to make my way through it with all its travails. Here is my Lord, watching over me always, never sleeping and always keeping me from evil and keeping me safe.

Our world today is much the same as it was when this psalm was written. Whilst there have certainly been advances in technology we haven't much evolved in our humanness. That is many still worship idols, many are still attracted only to those people who are similar to them, we seek scapegoats when things go wrong, we desire to nurture and protect our families, we still grieve when illness or death visits us and we still have amongst us the poor and alienated. Justice is hard to come by for many in our communities. However, as each of our lives unfold, we can still be assured that the Lord is watching over us as the psalmist says and this can bring us comfort.

Over the past week I've been reading two books that have opened my eyes to a part of the criminal justice system in this country. As you might have gathered from my accent I'm not from these parts so I'm fascinated to learn more about this country. The first book I read last week was *Just Mercy* written by a trial lawyer Bryan Stevenson. The second book was *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander. Both books were NY Times Best Sellers and have similar themes. They both comment on aspects of the criminal justice system that appears to be working to create a new caste of people who forever are labeled as criminals, denied work, housing and benefits often due to mistakes made as teenagers.

The criminal justice system in most countries is a complex system that sometimes incriminates innocent people. My own country is no different. Any complex system can produce injustices. We all hope though that the safeguards built into the system will identify the mistakes and rectify them by restoring the rights of the innocent fully in the shortest amount of time. However, in many cases it seems the system is purposely designed to make it as difficult as possible for the innocent to find justice. Many of us probably don't give this a second thought that is until we are caught up in the system as an innocent person. If we do become one of the incarcerated innocents would this psalm bring us the comfort we need, or would we want people to advocate for our release.

Some of the cases articulated in *Just Mercy* do just that, they open our eyes to these unjust practices and to the effort required to free the innocent from the system. The main thread of the book is the story of Walter McMillan who was wrongly charged and convicted for the killing of a woman in a store in a town in Alabama. Despite a solid alibi he was convicted on the false testimony of two men acting under the pressure of the local sheriff. He was sentenced to death for the alleged crime.

Bryan Stevenson, the author of the book, was a young lawyer who worked on providing legal representation for death row inmates who could not afford an attorney. Despite

numerous appeals and further investigation of the men that gave the false testimony, Walter sat on death row month after month listening to the deaths of those he had befriended there.

A strong rapport was struck between Walter and his attorney Bryan. Over six grueling years Bryan and his team at the *Equal Justice Initiative* fought the justice system so that Walter's innocence would be recognized and he'd be released from death row. Finally investigators identified the flaws in Walter's conviction and he won an appeal. The investigators work, along with the work of Bryan Stevenson had revealed the false testimony, and the prosecutor finally had to acknowledge that Walter was innocent.

The light of truth and justice does have a way of coming to the fore and revealing the many injustices in our world. But it takes the dedication of many and the brave few who risk their careers and often their lives to take a stand. Whistleblowers for instance often endure years of harassment from powerful institutions and corporations, because they believe their actions will change the system and reveal the injustice.

Bryan Stevenson and many attorneys like him do incredible work to free innocent people from the criminal justice system. Those innocent people are forever marked by their experience. Persistence though by justice advocates ensures some form of rebalancing of institutional systems that can be corrupted by power.

Jesus was no stranger to the corrupt and powerful institutions of his day. The temple priests were often more concerned with the rituals of the temple than adhering to the covenant laws and practices of Moses, with their inbuilt system of justice. Additionally the occupying forces of the Roman Empire continually hounded people to worship their gods and punished them mercilessly if they failed. Many people fell through the cracks and widows and orphans were often the casualties of such injustices.

Over these past few weeks we have walked with Jesus as he has been moving ever so diligently toward Jerusalem and to his destiny with representatives of these two institutions. As we know they conspired together to bring about the ultimate injustice of Jesus torture and then death at Calvary. Jesus taught his followers many things as they walked along together. From these parables we as a church are blessed to have them to reflect on.

At the point in time when Jesus tells the parable that is our gospel reading for today we know that he knew he was going to his judgment and death. But his disciples and followers were not as tuned in. Jesus knew he had to reassure them and prepare them for what lay ahead, especially on the other side of his death. Without this preparation his followers may have simply fallen apart and become consumed with the judgment of the world on their supposed savior.

The parable this morning juxtaposes two symbols of the world. The first a widow symbolizes vulnerability and tragedy. The other a judge symbolizes power and authority. He is described as a callous, self-centered man that neither fears God nor other people. Power seemed to sustain him and I wonder what sustained the widow. Was it her extended family, was it her singular desire for justice for whatever had been done against her or others, or was it her faith. Whatever it was this woman found in her heart the strength to keep at her desire, the strength to keep making her way into the court house, past the security and into the court room to confront the judge.

The judge sitting in the seat of power does not care for people and we can infer from that he does not care for justice. He seems to find his strength and arrogance in his powerful position. You can imagine him determining cases without a thought or care for the innocence or otherwise of the accused.

The widow manages to get under his skin and she annoys him. She keeps coming before him to demand his action to resolve her injustice. He dismisses her but again she comes back. Finally to please himself he relents and grants her the justice she has been seeking. A win for the little people we might say. Her persistence paid off. In the case of Mr. McMillan in Alabama it took six years for justice to prevail. For others it takes many years longer or indeed they die innocent at the hands of the state.

To be persistent in our faith journeys means effort and energy. For those of us that have felt vulnerable and isolated in our faith because of rejection or because we have been brought low by illness, grief or some other life circumstance, prayer can be the only way we can express ourselves and draw strength to get through the hour, the day or the week.

I sat with many patients and families in the hospital when I was a chaplain and one way that they found strength was through prayer. Prayer gave voice before God to their plight and their weakness in the face of seemingly overwhelming issues. Prayer was a comfort. One man who I ministered to for six months insisted I pray with him and read him psalms. We never spoke about his illness for he was intubated but he was persistent. He died after those six months one afternoon as I sat with him and his wife. His faith, and our prayers and care helped ease her grief at losing the love of her life.

We as a church community often can feel like these widows, lost and vulnerable when seemingly confronted by difficult circumstances. We can be deflated and feel that we don't have the energy to carry on. But Jesus has taught us to persist in prayer and to keep partitioning God to show us the way and to reveal to us the light and the truth of the future. Sometimes we might feel God is deaf. During those times we can reflect on our anxiety caused by the not knowing. These times of reflection can strengthen our faith that God is still watching over us and not sleeping as the psalmist says.

The widow as we have heard never gave up. Her sole focus was justice for her situation. She kept at the judge until he yielded. Bryan Stevenson and countless others in the world persisted in their calls with a faith that justice would prevail. We too have to persist in our calls to God through our prayers. This way we will understand the will of God for our own situations and our faith will be strengthened so that at the last day the risen Lord will find his body on earth hard at work living the gospel.

Amen