

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY – C  
October 21, 2007

Some years back, I knew two men. One of them was a wholesale jewelry salesman, the other man was his neighbor. The neighbor wanted to buy a fairly expensive piece of jewelry for his wife, but being the cheapskate that he was, he didn't want to pay full price. So he approached the jewelry salesman, even though he didn't know him very well, and asked for help.

The salesman was a good Christian man who was always happy to help someone save a buck, even a neighbor he was not especially close to. In his generosity, he showed the neighbor a few catalogues and quoted prices. The neighbor saw what he wanted, made a selection and awaited the delivery. When the salesman delivered the piece of jewelry, he apologized that he had made a mistake by showing the previous year's catalogue, so the price had gone up by almost \$100.

Not only did the ungrateful neighbor refuse to pay the additional cost, but he actually took the kind salesman to court and sued him for false advertising. And won. This is a true story. That neighbor has since died, and I have occasionally found myself wondering how he explained himself when he appeared before the eternal judge.

Our world often seems so unfair: evil appears to go unpunished, and goodness is apparently unrewarded. It certainly tests our belief in God's justice.

This folksy little parable we just heard in today's gospel is a great lesson about perseverance in prayer. For us it is a sign that one day that eternal judge will bring justice where there didn't seem to be any. The widow, who apparently is owed some money, is a symbol of helplessness. In those days there was no Social Security, no pensions, no insurance, no benefits. Women were not permitted to work, so one who was widowed had no choice but to become a beggar, a humiliating prospect. This widow had no money and no contacts. She really has no choice but to persist in her apparently hopeless cause. She has no intention of taking no for an answer.

This turns out to be a rather humorous battle between the widow and the judge. We are first told that the judge cares little for God or man, so he is arrogant, self-absorbed and oblivious to the needs of others. His words, though, are far more colorful in the original Greek. He says: Because this bothersome woman is pummeling me with her complaints, I'll have to decide in her favor so she doesn't give me a black eye.

Those who were listening to Jesus as he told this story began to realize what he was getting at, that in God's eternal kingdom, where justice will at last be perfect, all those who were ever victimized in this life will finally be able to claim their rights. And that's a wonderful thought, because it gives us all hope in the perfect justice we'll find in the next life.

But what do we do in the meantime? How do we keep our patience and especially our hope when we see all the unfairness around us? How do we keep going when we find ourselves—or someone we love—as the victim?

Today more than ever we must be nurtured by prayer. Not just an occasional Our Father when we want some favor from God, but the kind of prayer that is a regular part of our life. If we are not consistent in our prayer life—and persistent and courageous like this poor widow—we can't possibly expect a judgment in our favor. We get frustrated when we don't get what we want, and after a while we get tired of praying and we disregard the power of our prayers and just give up.

What would have happened to the Israelites if Moses had given up when Amalek came and waged war against them? As long as Moses held his arms up in prayer the Israelites were winning. But when he grew tired and dropped his arms to rest, Amalek's army would have the advantage over the Israelites. Isn't it interesting that Moses needed help, which he received from two of his colleagues: Aaron and Hur. They supported his arms, one on each side, all day until sunset. In the end, of course, they won.

Like Moses praying for his beleaguered people, our prayer life too can be difficult. Sometimes we can continue to raise our arms in prayer only when others are holding them up as we grow weary and begin to falter. And in the same way, we might be the ones to hold up the arms of someone else, when we see them about to give up.

This parable ends without telling us if the judge gave in to the widow and justice was accomplished. But *we* are the widow, so only we can provide the ending to the story, which is this. As Christians we have learned that when Jesus went to the cross, not only was this the greatest injustice of all time but it made him look like a complete failure. Fortunately we see the crucifixion not as the end of the story, but rather the beginning.

The final sentence of this gospel reading is most peculiar. Jesus says: "But when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on the earth?" Sounds kind of pessimistic and depressing, doesn't it? But it's really a challenge for us to do two things: to persevere in our prayer, and to realize that in the end, evil and injustice only *seem* to win.