

Nineteenth Sunday in after Pentecost

16.10.2022
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Introduction

Friends, our reflection on the text for this week focuses on the possibilities that conflict mediation may offer. Most denominations have an in-house, or external mediation service offered. One of the organisations at the heart of the Spirituality of Conflict project, Place for Hope, has many years of specialist services supporting congregations and faith communities as they seek to transform conflicts (little and large) into an opportunity for learning, change, justice and deeper relationship. placeforhope.org.uk

Active listening opens the door to seeking justice that, as well as addressing right and wrong, also addresses relationships that cause abuses of right and wrong. It calls for us to provide effective spaces for conversation, for dialogue, for hearing each other and seeking to understand each other.

This text for this week asks us to consider the times it right to bring people together, not only so that justice can be served, but so that a new understanding can be gained. And through this understanding comes a righting of relationships, a righting of power dynamics, a righting of the injustices that are apparent in our land.

Before we go to the reflection for the week, consider what the necessary circumstances are, for you, whereby the relationships at the heart of injustices can be properly addressed.

Text

Luke 18:1–8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Comment

The stories of Jesus seeking justice for the poor, the outcasts, the lowest in society and those without power are many. Indeed justice is a key theme that runs through the Gospels passages, and many today are called to readdressing issues of injustice in their discipleship with Jesus. Any yet this passage raises the question of why would God be so keen to grant justice to his chosen ones if there is also a question about whether, when the Son of Man comes, he will 'find faith on earth'.

When one party considers that they have been wronged by another, they very often want to have their story heard by a 'judge', and for justice to be served to their opponent. The judge may not be in the courts, but perhaps a third party who holds some positional power and role. This is what the widow is seeking – justice from a judge. The judge hears her story, backs her story and serves justice to her opponent. On the surface it seems that the parable is saying if a person is persistent, speaks (or even nags) the one with power often enough, constantly bothers this person to wear them down, then eventually they will be granted their request and justice will be served, even for those who are vulnerable. As a vulnerable member of her own society, the widow may be representing those who in our society are without a voice.

Justice is key to discipleship. We are called to speak when others are without a voice, and to call on society that all may have a voice. We petition for a better world and not to turn a blind eye to the injustices around us. This passage may be taken to enhance this work.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, spoke of Social Holiness, 'whereby the holiness of heart and life is manifest in the Christian life'. He was a practical theologian, getting involved in social justice within his own context. He visited prisoners, listened to the poor, preached in the open air to reach those outside the Church, campaigned to end enslavement and set up opportunities to work for those who were caught up in prostitution or who would have been destitute.* Today many churches are actively involved in petitions to call for change in legislation or practices that are unjust, and in social action projects – whether that be with those who find themselves homeless, in debt, refugees, victims of domestic abuse... the list is endless.

And yet the ending of our lectionary reading questions that even when God grants justice to his chosen ones, 'will he [the Son of Man] will find faith on earth' (v. 8). It seems that while praying fervently, sincerely and with passion is a biblical principle and central to our relationship with Christ, this reading might not be about this. This is not about praying so that we get what we want, or pestering God to wear God down. There is a different angle to this parable.

Here is a women who wants justice, who wants her story to be heard, who wants

her opponent to be treated according to the alleged actions towards her. As well as needing justice, she is in conflict with her opponent, and is in need of that critical relationship to be addressed.

Mediation offers those in conflict an opportunity to share stories with each other. Yet it is not about who is right and who is wrong, putting a judgment on the situation. It is about listening and understanding. Of hearing and seeing the same story from another's perspective. At its best, Mediation is about transformation. It is about the active listening between parties who have been in tension with each other – a listening that begins to understand the others' story. Of beginning to see that there may be more than one way to tell the story, that there may be more than one perspective. Listening to each other in order to understand, not to blame. It opens up opportunities for a new relationship to emerge out of the vulnerability, bitterness and pain that came before. At its best, it takes the relationship as it stands now, and sees it transformed into something that you could not expect or see before the conflict emerged.

Active listening opens the door to seeking justice that, as well as addressing right and wrong, also addresses relationships that cause abuses of right and wrong. It calls for us to provide effective spaces for conversation, for dialogue, for hearing each other and seeking to understand each other. This passage is asking us to consider the times it right to bring people together, not only so that justice can be served, but so that a new understanding can be gained. And through this understanding comes a righting of relationships, a righting of power dynamics, a righting of the injustices that are apparent in our land.

This calls for a different kind of persistence. A different kind of praying. A persistence that looks to grace and holiness. A prayer that is willing to not just do the talking, but also the listening and understanding. A prayer that holds both parties in the arms of God – so that justice becomes transformational and permanent.

Response

When was the last time you sought to create a space to listen to a person with whom you are at odds? To take the time and energy not just to put across your own valid view point, and to insist that this is the one and only way of looking at the situation – that you of course are right and that the other person is wrong.

This week, when a tension arises, step back and ask yourself – what is the truth that I need to share, and consider what the truth might be for the other person. Prepare yourself to share both your story, without judging the other, and to hear the story from the others' perspective. What will you find difficult to hear? How will you receive this? How will you seek to understand a different perspective to your own?

Prayer

A conversation
Dialogue
Space around the kitchen table
Space around the coffee table
A space for stories to be shared

A space for understanding to be gained

Space.
Space to listen over a hot mug of tea
Space to hear another.

We pray for space in our lives
Space to hold each other
A space with Jesus in our midst.

Amen

Further Reading

**<https://theologyeverywhere.org/2016/07/04/social-holiness-and-social-justice/>*