

**Proper 24 (C)
of**

**Listening, Responding, Sharing and the Unjust Judge
Luke 18:1-8**

Sometimes, in making sense of things read in church, it pays to start a long ways from the lessons and arrive at them only gradually. So we'll start with the first hymn, the one with the Jewish melody. (*Hymnal 1982*, #536, *God has spoken to his people*) Note the first line, "God has spoken to his people." Were you Jewish, that would be an important statement. No, it would be **the** central statement. Now it is also central if one is Christian, but for us the statement has been overlaid by a good deal of fuss, feathers and furor. For us, the original force of the statement has been a bit disguised or even lost.

The key question of the Old Testament – and also the New – is, "What do you do when God talks to you?" What do you do when God talks to you? First, of course, you listen. That needs to be said because sometimes we don't. A great deal of the time I suspect God feels as if he were engaged in a monolog.

So listening is first. This is exceedingly important. We in the church need to **study** listening – not just listen as if it's something we do naturally, without effort or work, but **study** listening. Those of you who have had either children or parents – and you've all had one or the other or both – know that our first understanding of their words is frequently not what is meant. We misunderstand even what and who we love. Listening takes work and we need to hear, sometimes, the same message over and over. That's one of the reasons for set prayers in the liturgy. They allow us to listen to the same message until we actually hear it. Some Christian communities seem to suppose that we need to worship always in some new way, as if we had already adequately heard, digested and were acting on the last message we'd gotten.

I'm sure all of you have heard the story about this, but I'll repeat it since the value of repetition seems to be a part of the message this morning.

It's about the Episcopalian priest called to a congregation which really liked short sermons. So his contract called for five minute ones. His first Sunday he walked into the pulpit, said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" and returned to his seat. The service continued. Everyone thought, "This is great." The next Sunday he walked into the pulpit, said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." and returned to his seat. The service continued. The third Sunday he did likewise. By this time the congregation was beginning to think they weren't getting their money's worth. A delegation from the vestry visited the new rector. They asked, "Are you going to say something new?" Reply: "Not until you show evidence of having heard the first message." End of interview.

Listening. We need to hear the message, the same message, over and over again. This is as true in our relationships with each other as in our relationship with God. One proper use for tradition in churches is to provide set and known situations within which disciplined listening can happen. So listening comes first. It's something we need to study, to work at. We seldom hear either God or each other adequately the first time around.

For instance, in Christian ethics, the objective is not just to do what we're told, but to

hear God speaking to us about what we should be doing. If I want to do what I'm told, I could pick any political party and they'd be glad to tell me what to do. If just doing what I'm told is the objective there are an infinite number of people and systems glad to oblige.

But the objective is to make what we are told a part of a growing relationship. Here a legalistic ethic tends toward weakness. Such an ethic is not, all too frequently, a part of a growing, developing, unfolding, relationship. We are considerate of each other not only because that's what we ought to do, but also because in that consideration a matrix is created which allows additional listening and additional responding. But a legalistic righteousness truncates listening. If the answers are already known there is no need to listen. All there is, is a need to obey. Conversation risk creating new perspectives. It risks encouraging us to seek meaning as well as obedience. Yet all through scripture it's clear that God is interested in giving life, and that means being able to listen, and then to respond and then to share the response. On the basis of shared response we listen again to see if we don't hear something more. This is the cycle of the Christian life. It enables us to receive, and to continue to receive, meaning from God.

It's also the cycle of the Jewish life, but I don't mind sharing.

It's also a reason why Christianity has a legitimate, although somewhat ignored, interest in art. Art is a way of sharing what we've been listening to. That's an essential aspect of the Christian life, to share what we've been listening to with who we've been listening with and on that basis to listen again. That's the cycle: you listen, you hear, you respond. In the responding you share, then you listen again. This is, if you will, not just the cycle of the Christian ethical life, but the cycle of worship and liturgy. That's what we're about on Sunday morning.

Now, the question. What does Luke's unjust judge have to do with all this? In my pastoral work I sometimes feel an affinity with the judge. I wish I could get away with neither fearing God nor regarding other human beings – they come so rapidly, especially in the morning before coffee. What's missing from the Judge? Responsiveness. He neither fears God, so he doesn't respond to God nor does he have respect for people, so he doesn't respond to them. The cycle I just described is, for the judge, utterly broken.

Notice the resemblance between the description of the judge and certain classic descriptions of God given in technical theology. In these, God does not respond to human beings because it would open him to influence by human beings, a denigration of his majesty and self-sufficiency. God's isolation can be understood as similar to that of the judge. Everything originates out of himself, not in response to either God or human beings. (One has to watch out with theology, sometimes one asserts strange things without knowing it and we end up learning about God from a villain. To assert of God what would be reprehensible in human beings leads to a peculiar theology. Yet we do assert, unless we are careful, these very things.)

So the widow is persistent. This takes us back to listen, respond, share cycle. The judge finally says, "I will respond." Then the widow's case is heard. Justice does not happen outside this listening, responding, sharing cycle. If I don't listen, and share and respond I don't know what justice will be for you. What justice do you need in your life, does your community need

in its life? Without listening I do not know. If listening isn't there, justice won't be there, at least not from me.

I suspect that the early church had a hard time with this little parable. Jesus used quite undesirable people as models of the desirable. In this case, it's an unjust judge – unregarding judge might be even better since there's no evidence the judge acts unjustly once he acts. He delays justice but I see no evidence he twists it. Jesus's negative assessment is of a lack of response rather than of positively unjust decisions. And if the judge stands for God, that describes our situation well. When will the judge of all the earth do right? When will God act to end injustice, cruelty, and the panoply of evil and suffering? Why is he absent, why silent? Why does he seem to be as unregarding of the human condition as the judge in Jesus's story?

So the widow becomes our model as she keeps on sharing her situation even if the response isn't all that it should be. The model she offers is not one of harassing God for particular things, but of perseverance. Well, the parallels seem clear. Our lives are like the widow and the judge. We wait for justice, we desire it, but we don't achieve it either by act of ours or by gift of God. What do we do? We can abandon the desire for justice or we can continue to cry out for it. I do know that I find my meaning in the persistence of relationship, even if that relationship only points to an unachieved justice. And it is in the persistence of a relationship with God that that meaning is able to grow as fully as it can.

This story has been interpreted to mean that if you nag God, you get what you want. That's a dangerous and sub-Christian interpretation. But the story is really about persistence in relationship with God even if we can't always see God acting. It's an assertion that the meaning of our existence is found in that persistence. And the first element in persistence in a relationship is to persist in listening.

So the last statement in the gospel, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" is not about whether or not there will be someone left who holds the correct set of doctrines and can, with a clear conscience, recite the creed. That's not what he's talking about. When he asks, "Will the Son of Man find faith on earth?" he's talking about persistence in relating. Will people persevere in seeking the meaning of their lives in a relation with God – and persevere in seeking the meaning of God in the unfolding of their lives?

Now, one last piece. Our relationship with God is a highly flexible thing. Relating to God and herding cats belong together. If you are listening you are liable to hear something you haven't heard before. When you share and respond, you are liable to become aware of things happening that you weren't aware of before. That means that the listening and responding and sharing will change next time around. It comes close to a denial of God to be seeking a structure of belief, a church, a kind of prayer, a relationship, in which things stop, in which they change no more. When things change no more, God is dead. Our liturgy is a small scale model of life ordered to enable listening. We say the same things over again in order that new things may be heard within them. That's why, ultimately, a state of static rest is not the objective of Christian existence.

That's about enough of that. Please stand for the creed, understood dynamically.