

WHAT WE'RE MADE OF

--Have you heard the one about the duck?

A duck goes into a bar. The duck asks, "You got any grapes?"

"No," the puzzled bartender says, and the duck leaves.

The next day the duck arrives at the same bar. The duck asks again, "You got any grapes?"

"No," says the now-irritated bartender, who discouragingly adds, "Listen, if you ever come back in here again, I'll nail your webbed feet to the floor, and we'll use you for punching practice."

The next day the doors swing open, and there, once again, is the duck. "You got any nails?" the duck asks.

"No!" shouts the bartender.

"Good," says the duck. "Then you got any grapes?"

--This silly little story mirrors the parable that was just read concerning the widow's continual pleading to the "unjust" judge. In characterizing him as being "unjust," it is meant, we are told, that he "neither fear[s] God nor ha[s] respect for people" (18.2). That is to suggest clearly that what occurs by the end of the parable is not the result of anything brought to the situation on the part of the judge himself.

This rather hard-hearted fellow finds himself meeting his match in a surprising place, pitted against a certain widow in the city. Determined to have her opportunity before the magistrate, to have her petition heard and satisfactorily resolved, this widow, it seems, is incredibly tenacious, persistent to the point of being obnoxious, troublesome, and downright annoying.

In the end, the judge acts in her favor--but not because of his good nature, remember. He knows that, if he doesn't grant her request, she will simply drive him crazy. So, by virtue of her persistence, she gets what she has been demanding, what she has so doggedly been insisting upon, what she's been so single-pointedly crying out for--which, in this instance, is a good thing.

--Luke uses this provocative little parable in his gospel, in order to illustrate something of the nature of prayer. That may be a bit of a stretch from the original parable, but that doesn't stop him from appending the final few verses as we have them: "Listen to what the unjust judge says," Luke adds, no doubt putting these words into Jesus' mouth, "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?" (18.7).

It's a clever application on the evangelist's part: If, in our prayers, we can be half as focused and half as insistent as that widow is, to "pray always and not to lose heart" (18.1), then surely God, our "just judge," will answer, and will answer speedily.

OK, message concerning prayer received. That is as much as usually gets preached, but there is more to be said.

--Apart from Luke's spin on the parable, its meaning is considerably broader than that. While the implications for prayer certainly are here, there is much more involved. That "more" needs to be articulated because, in terms of our personal and congregational lives, it's quite important. Here it is: Generally speaking, perseverance always pays dividends. Persistence prevails.

Our hearts, you see, are always inclined in some specific direction or other. There is no such thing as being alive and not having that occurring all the time. The centers of gravity in our personalities are always leaning one way or another--which can cut two ways, perhaps good, and perhaps not so good. That basic inclination, that leaning, on our parts effectively represents the ongoing series of personal "petitions" that, like the widow, we are making, hour after hour, and day after day.

That's what identifies us with her, as we imagine her standing outside the window of the judge and incessantly pressing her suit. Know it or not, we do the same as, time after time, we crave and dwell on and day-dream about and dedicate ourselves to one thing or another--not all of it good or noble or healthy.

The parable tells us plainly that it is the persisting in that concentration which will invariably yield results, both positive (as in the case of prayer) but also negative (as in a multitude of other cases). Over time, to a significant degree, like the rather beleaguered judge, Life gives us, in some form or other, what we request, request, request; press, press, press for; and demand, demand, demand. Like the widow, we, too, get what we have been pursuing, what we have so doggedly been insisting upon, what we've been so single-pointedly crying out for--which, again, may or may not be such a good thing for us.

It's that "you reap what you sow" sort of thing (see 2 Cor 9.6; Gal 6.7). It is fitting that, in the parable, the one who is being relentlessly petitioned is a judge, for reaping what we have sown is a sort of justice. More times than not, we get what we've actually been working toward.

In short, the parable concerns the inherent power of what we are focusing on as the means, for better or for worse, by which something is brought into reality. We create our own futures through what we persist in concentrating upon. Oh, there is always the grace of God, of course, but much of life is the result of a million insistent preferences and demands and decisions that we have made along the way.

So, the parable doesn't simply direct us in the way things should be, as in the instance of sincere prayer, but, more generally, describes the way that things actually are for us. To repeat, perseverance invariably will produce dividends, both good and not so good; and in one manner or another, persistence will always prevail.

--We need, then, to wake up. We need quickly to get honest with ourselves, and to bring greater awareness and care to how we live. What we're truly made of, who we really are, the destiny which is ours, will always come through, thanks to what we persistently--not always so consciously--choose to do and not to do.

So, if we say that we want something to happen and it doesn't happen, it just may be that, despite our public declarations, privately we aren't really that committed to having it happen at all. We typically want to pin that failure on God, when responsibility for it lies at our very own feet: Often, what we are actually persistent about isn't what we say we want--meaning that God doesn't fail us; we fail ourselves.

Speaking of ourselves, casting an eye toward our own inner inclinations, considering our own characteristic leanings, who are we? What are we made of, really? What truly do we stand for? Where genuinely do we have ourselves pointed?

Let's not "duck" our responsibility here, shall we?