

**29<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

Cycle C, 10.16.16

Exodus 17:8-13; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

Luke 18:1-8

**PERSISTENTLY PURSUING JUSTICE**

Judging people by stereotypes prevents us from seeing reality and people as they are, but it's not easy to break through stereotypes. LuAnn was practically a permanent fixture at the mental hospital in the little sleepy town of Weston, West Virginia, where I took my chaplaincy internship as a young seminarian many years ago. She was one of a thousand patients in the hospital. There was one clinical psychiatrist for all one thousand patients. It was more like a holding center for human refuse than a mental care facility. LuAnn was around forty-three years old. She had two children and lived in a town about thirty miles from the hospital. She had close-cropped red hair and, although she was short, she looked strong... and mean. I saw her when I first got to the hospital. She was on the ward to which I was assigned as student chaplain-- the second floor of Building C.



LuAnn's pattern had been established a long time before. When the nurses thought she had calmed down enough, she would be released from the hospital and returned to her home, her family and her small town. After a few days back home she would start to 'act up'. She'd go into the corner drug store and throw things off the shelves or she'd pick a fight

on the street, or break a neighbor's window. For her, freedom was an unbearable burden. Her husband couldn't stop her and he feared for the safety of the children. The police would pick her up and return her to the hospital, where, inevitably, she would be restrained in bed for a day or two because of her violence. Here she was again and I stood next to her bed in awkward silence for a few minutes. The cloth strips tying her wrists and ankles to the bed seemed so cruel. What else could I do but extend a compassionate glance. No words came to my lips. I finally got up the courage to sit on the edge of the bed across from her. Maybe she sensed my own fear and helplessness. *'I wish there were something I could do, LuAnn. It must be terrible for you.'* *'Get out a' here, preacherman. Who the hell told you to come around here anyhow?'* She turned her head away from me and muttered some obscenities. It was a scene that would be repeated many times in the following weeks.

That summer of chaplaincy training came to an end faster than I thought it would on the first dreary day I set foot in the horrid smelling elevator of the admissions building. Our supervisor, a Methodist minister, spent a lot of time toward the end of the program discussing the need for *closure* in pastoral settings -- saying one's good-byes and bringing relationships to a termination point. I couldn't understand how it applied in this strange setting where people barely knew even their own names most of the time. But, as I made my rounds that last week, I bid farewell to the nurses I got to know and to the patients that I had been able to communicate with. Even the ones that seemed in a daze got a "Take care now" or "God bless you."

Word had already gotten around that the summer crop of student chaplains was just about finished for another term. As I got to the end of my assigned hall near the nurse's station, I looked into the dormitory

and there was LuAnn, sitting on one of the beds. She was back in the hospital again. As usual, her captivity seemed to be her salvation. I considered just walking past. With her, it was difficult to know what to expect. I didn't want another round of verbal abuse. I walked into the room. *I'll be leaving this week, LuAnn. My summer program is over. I hope you'll be okay. I'll pray for you.* As she got up from the bed and started walking toward me, I flinched inside. I never anticipated the hug she gave me; it was firm and knowing. The tears in her eyes unlocked the tears in mine and something blossomed. A hardened heart melted and a suspicious spirit yielded. So it is with stereotypes that cloud our vision. We miss what's real and what lies beneath.

The gospel today has been the victim of stereotyping over the centuries. Sometimes it's been called "The Parable of the Unjust Judge." Others title it "The Parable of the Persistent Widow." Is it a comic parable meant to make us laugh at the ludicrous picture of a powerful judge cowering before a helpless old widow? Or is it a deadly serious portrait of one small victory for justice in the face of shameless systems of rampant injustice? What were the first hearers of this parable supposed to hear? And what in this story are we, as disciples of Jesus, supposed to learn and imitate? The portrait of the judge is very unsettling. Described as *a judge who neither feared God nor respected any human being*, he is acting against every description of a judge the people knew from their Hebrew scriptures. He is supposed to be representing God who hears the cry of the orphan and the widow, who judges justly and affirms the right without delay. This description of "the unjust judge" would have been unsettling to Jesus' audience. This is not their stereotype, nor the behavior admonished and encouraged for judges in their scriptures.

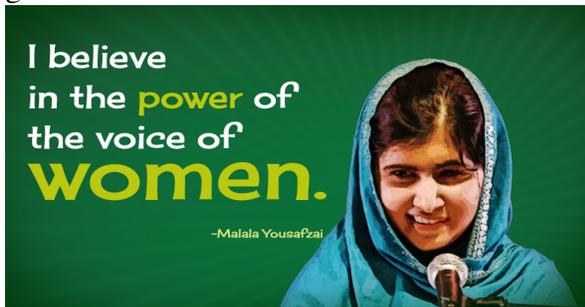
No less startling is the character of the widow. Having no social status or personal resources, being a woman and, worse, a widow, this poor and defenseless woman marches into the arena of the court – clearly someplace reserved only for males. Recall the woman at the well in Samaria who dared to speak to Jesus -- this woman boldly faces the cold-hearted judge and voices her demands for justice. We're given the impression from the parable that she has done this many times and, yes, her persistence wins the day. Jesus breaks the stereotype of the weak and powerless woman, setting her instead as an example – a powerful portrait of a godly widow persistently pursuing justice.



Think Candace Lightner. After her 13-year-old daughter, Cari, was killed by a drunk driver in Fair Oaks, California, in 1980, Candace founded the organization MADD – Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. There is at least one MADD office in every state of the United States and at least one in each province of Canada. These offices offer victim services and many resources involving alcohol safety. MADD has shown that drunk driving has been reduced by half since its founding.

Think Malala Yousafzai. As a young girl Malala defied the Taliban in Pakistan and demanded that girls be allowed to receive an education. She attended a school that her father had founded. After the Taliban began attacking girls' schools in her

country, Malala gave a speech in Peshawar, Pakistan, in September 2008. The title of her talk was, "*How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?*" She was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman in 2012 while riding to school in a bus. A portion of her skull was removed to treat the swelling in her brain. Transferred to England for treatment, she was eventually taken out of a medically induced coma. Though she would require multiple surgeries—including repair of a facial nerve to fix the paralyzed left side of her face—she had suffered no major brain damage, but survived and went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Now at the age of nineteen, she continues her advocacy and her commitment to supporting education for girls around the world.



The parable of Jesus encourages girls and women and all of us to be persistent in naming and confronting the injustices that surround us, knowing that the power of God's justice is stronger than the forces that work against it. We rely not on our own strength, but on the grace of God, for as we sang in the psalm today: *Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*

*Fr. John Kasper, OSFS*