

October 16, 2022 Proper 24
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Relentlessness of God
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

“The name is strange. It startles one at first. It is so bold, so new, so fearless. It does not attract, rather the reverse. But when one reads the poem this strangeness disappears. The meaning is understood. As the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and unperturbed pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His Divine grace. And though in sin or in human love, away from God it seeks to hide itself, Divine grace follows after, unwearingly follows ever after, till the soul feels its pressure forcing it to turn to Him alone in that never ending pursuit.”

These words were written by Jesuit J. F. X O’Conor to describe the poem *The Hound of Heaven* written by Francis Thomson in 1890. Thomson’s work is said to have inspired other writers such as G.K. Chesterton and J.R.R. Tolkien. His poem is about the relentlessness of God pursuing someone who, over a lifetime of trying to evade God, is eventually caught up - not in God’s wrath or vengeance - but in God’s loving embrace of forgiveness and mercy. At 182 verses, it is a long poem, that even today is worth the time to read. *The Hound of Heaven* continues to strike a chord of relevancy today and has been the inspiration for many musical settings, appears in modern secular entertainment, works of Christian fiction, and Christian commentaries like *The Gospel According to the Peanuts*.

Perhaps one of the reasons the poem’s relevance endures to this day is because Thomson does not depict God as a far away entity who is above us and doesn’t care about all the joys and sufferings people experience in life. Nor is God a cruel overlord who lavishes rewards on favorites for preferred behavior while punishing others for mistakes. Instead, *The Hound of Heaven* is God as the everlasting love that pursues and persists and never gives up reaching for us no matter the circumstances of life. It could be fair to say that for Francis Thompson God never gives up on us.

This theme can be easily recognized in all our readings for today. It is the same concept Jesus was trying to convey to his disciples in today’s Gospel when he told the parable of a persistent widow seeking justice and a judge who was anything but just or good. Despite the author of the Gospel having Jesus clearly articulate that the judge in the parable is unjust and had no respect for people or God, many commentaries and sermons interpret this parable with God as the unjust judge and encourage us to keep pestering God with our prayers as God will

eventually give in because, like the judge, God will be sick and tired of hearing from us. That is not what Jesus was saying with this parable. Such an interpretation may have more to do with how we imagine God than how Jesus or the author of Luke's Gospel presented God. Perhaps we don't realize the error of associating God with the character in power – the judge – when that is not the God Jesus showed us. God does have power, but it is not the power of political figures like presidents or kings. The power of God is the power of forgiveness, mercy, grace, generosity. God doesn't want to rule the world, God wants to love us and wants us to love God and each other and, as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, "while we are it, love ourselves."

So, if the unjust judge is not God in the parable, which character is most like God? The answer is the widow. That might be hard for some of us to wrap our minds around because the widow is a woman, and even though God has no gender, a female character that portrays the characteristics of God can be challenging for a patriarchal society to accept. In the culture and time when the Gospels were written, women had no legal rights without a male relative, which means the character in Jesus' parable is vulnerable. She has no one to speak for her and must endure day after day of rejection or being ignored by the judge until he finally breaks.

What if, instead of thinking of this parable as breaking God down with our prayers, we thought about the times we have ignored or rejected God? What if the judge is people, or a person, who believes they know better, or are afraid or whatever excuse we can think of to justify ignoring God? This means our prayers aren't transactions like buying stuff online. God is not Amazon waiting to fulfill our material desires or needs. God is not an algorithm working to anticipate what item might trigger our impulse to buy something based on our past searches or purchases. Our prayers are not part of a holy consumer economy because our relationship with God is not consumeristic. God yearns for something far deeper than wish fulfillment.

Our prayers are a way we can be drawn deeper into the life of God and God's love for the world. Through prayer we enter a different kind of relationship with the world, one where we don't think of the world as resources to use to our benefit. Instead, we recognize the deep connections we have to each other and to the animals and plants and water and our responsibilities to care for each other and the world. This means works of justice, of striving to make the world a better place for all people regardless of age, gender, gender identity, ability, socio

economic status, race, and all is an expression of prayer. When we realize prayer is about our relationship with God, then it becomes more than words in a book, it becomes our whole life. Every word we say. Every action. Every thought. Every moment of our lives becomes a prayer to God and one of the many ways God can be present.

This in no way is intended to diminish the beautiful prayers in our *Book of Common Prayer* or church services. They have their place in our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. The point is there is always more to it; there is another layer, another level, another way God is reaching out to us. Always.

In a time when so many people are feeling the desire to withdraw, or are tired, or frustrated with so much in the world; when divisions are increasing and there is so much loss, it can be easy to lose heart, to despair, to give up. This is nothing new. One hundred and thirty-two years ago Francis Thompson experienced those same things as he struggled with estrangement from his family for failing to live into his father's expectations and an opium addiction. He did indeed lose heart and despaired. However, he was not alone and received kindness and help from a woman who was a prostitute. She helped him recognize God with him even in his most desperate moments. What helped Francis Thompson find hope wasn't the ability to pray his way through his despair, it was realizing God never gave up on him, and was with him, especially in the generosity and kindness of others. That is how he was able to surrender to God's love.

Perhaps the greatest comfort any of us can receive in these days – and perhaps it is also a challenge - is that whenever we feel tired, or despair at the bad news that seems relentless, is to remember there is One who is even more relentless than the news. That we are not alone, God is near, God doesn't give up, not on us, not on the world. When we struggle to have faith, perhaps that is the moment, like in the poem *The Hound of Heaven*, we can surrender to God, let God carry us, even in prayer, and perhaps find ourselves even closer to God and each other and is the expression of faith on earth Jesus seeks.