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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Proper 24/Year C/Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

One of the most popular forms of psychotherapy for couples in recent times has been what is called Imago Relationship Therapy. Imago Therapy is based on the theory that, as soon as we come into the world, we start developing images in our minds of how things are supposed to be—what we are comfortable with—who we are attracted to or will be attracted to. We are born into a matrix of relationships with parents and other caretakers, and our experiences and interactions with them translate into what we come to think of as “normal”—for better or for worse. Throughout our life journeys, we are attracted to people who fit these images—this Imago. We are drawn to the familiar, whether we are conscious of it or not, and even if we consciously are dead-set against being attracted to that particular familiarity. The example that is frequently used is that of the woman who grows up in a family with addiction issues, who vows to herself that she will never re-create that family as an adult, but “Bingo!”—there she is with the same dynamics. The addiction to substances or processes may be different, but there is always something big that is interfering, something else that the partner is “married to” that is taking him away from her. We get attracted to Miss Right or Mister Right because of how we think they are “un-like” our primary caretakers, only to discover that we feel the same—the same little person inside—feeling fearful, feeling angry, feeling unloved. The unconscious mind has said to itself, “This person is finally the one who will meet my needs and make me complete. This person will always be there for me. This person will never abandon me.” Inevitably we are

disappointed because no human being can make up for what has been lacking in our earlier experience. In the process of Imago therapy, the attempt is made to clear up each partner's vision and develop the ability to see who the other really is—to break open the mutual boxes in which each has unwittingly caught the other and caught themselves. The goal is to help couples find health and wholeness in their relationship rather than continue to be frustrated and angry over how they are not meeting each other's needs—to be able to see each other as the unique people they are and to appreciate or at least work with the differences.

Most of us could use some Imago therapy in our relationship with God. Those images that start developing in early life, given to us by parents and caretakers, reinforced by well-meaning preachers and Sunday School teachers, become steel traps for false notions of who God is and who we are in relationship with God. Our distorted views of God create distorted views of ourselves—and none of this is easily changed.

Parables are stories that break open steel traps. They break open our fixed ideas about who God is. There is no one “correct” interpretation of a parable. If there were one correct interpretation, on a quick read-through, today's parable from Luke would be very problematic. It is tempting to simply assume that, if there is a “judge” in a parable, the judge must be intended to be God. So, on that quick read-through, it would be easy to come away thinking that God is not primarily interested in justice—and that, if we don't take “no” for an answer to our requests of God, if we keep nagging, we will get what we want--the mind of God will be changed—our prayers will be answered and definitely in the affirmative.

However, if we take a little slower read-through and focus more closely, we will see that even the parable itself offers us more than one meaning. It starts out in an unusual way for a

parable. Usually they are not interpreted for us. In the gospel of Mark (Mark 4), Jesus even admits that parables are meant to confuse—this one is a confusing one. It starts out by stating that it is a parable about our need to pray always, but then tells sort of a funny story that doesn't quite support the assertion. So, what's going on?

What if Jesus is saying that God is in fact the “unjust judge”? Well, we don't have much evidence that the judge in our parable is a bad guy. Where is the injustice? One of our national symbols is the symbol of “blind justice” holding and balancing the scales. That is a comforting symbol. We want justice to be blind—to not be overly influenced by popular opinion or even by religious opinion. Seems like the judge in our parable could pass that test. We think of there being two choices—that there is either justice or injustice. But, in the kingdom of God, maybe there is a third choice. God wants justice for all, but God wants more than that. Maybe God is the unjust judge because God goes far beyond justice and showers us with mercy. Maybe justice is God's minimum standard for what is right and good. Maybe God is the unjust judge because God's scales are tilted—and always tilted in favor of life and well-being and pure generosity. We don't get what we deserve. We get more than we deserve—much more. God doesn't deal in an economy of “deserving” or “worthiness.” God deals in an economy of “mercy” and “grace” and “generosity.” Justice plus, plus, plus.

Back to the parable. What if we do, in fact, need to “pray always,” but not because it means that we will eventually get what we want? If we pray because we think we will eventually get what we want, we are often sorely disappointed. Maintaining a consistent life of prayer is a struggle. We attempt various prayer disciplines, trying to find the one that will fit best

for our individual personalities or trying to find one that we can stick to or perhaps see results when we thought we saw none before.

But, our need to “pray always” is not about measurable, or even consistently perceptible, results. Prayer is not necessarily about petitioning God with specific requests. Maybe we need to “pray always” because that is a way of acknowledging and reminding ourselves of who we are—spiritual beings who need to reach out to God—a way of opening ourselves up to the Source of life to be nurtured and fed. We need to “pray always” because prayer clears up our vision and opens our eyes to new possibilities. We need to “pray always” because God is our primary connection, our lifeline, and we may need some Imago therapy in that relationship as well as in human relationships. We need to remove our projections from God and let God be who God is. A saying attributed to a number of people goes, “God created us in God’s own image, and we returned the compliment.” According to popular writer Anne Lamott, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out he hates all the same people you do.” Committing to a process of “praying always” eventually clears up those sorts of assumptions. It may be a lifelong process.

In our Education for Ministry group, the overall theme for students at all four levels for this year is, “Living into the Relationship with God.” God is far beyond our understanding. God cannot “be fully grasped by our finite minds” (Ford, 41). St. Anselm of Canterbury, Archbishop from 1093 to 1109, described God as “that than which no greater can be conceived.” We can only begin to know who God is by daring to “live into the relationship.” I suspect that for most of us God is the Persistent Widow and we are the Unjust Judge—that God is in relentless pursuit of us, but we are able to come up with endless excuses not to do the one thing necessary—to

trust enough to surrender all that we are and all that we have in order to commit to entering into a long journey into the heart of God—to begin to know God from the inside and to be changed. It only costs everything.