



Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
October 20, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Since our gospel text this morning involves a courtroom and a judge, I'll start with a few one-liners about judges.

A man wants a divorce and he tells the judge, "I can't take it anymore, she's out every night hopping from bar to bar." The judge says, "what's she doing?" and the man replies "looking for me!"

A guy is hauled into court for assaulting his friend with several guitars he owned. The judge says, "first offender?" and the man says "no, first a Gibson, then a Fender."

A man is on trial for cannibalism and the judge asks him what he has to say for himself and the man says "if you are what you eat then I'm completely innocent."

Okay, these are terrible. Here's just one more. A judge looks down from his bench at the defendant and says "you're here for public drunkenness and throwing wild, loud parties" and the defendant says "great, let's get started!"

On that note, let's get started on thinking about this morning's story, which is often called the Parable of the Persistent Widow. What strikes me about this text is the line where Jesus says that God will "grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night." That line jumps out at me because, to be honest, I really do wonder about it sometimes. There is a lot of unfairness, injustice, and pain in the world, and there are a lot of people crying to God, and, frankly, it is sometimes hard to see when and where and how God has heard and answered their prayers.

I was particularly struck by this in light of the guest speaker who addressed the clergy of our Diocese this past week at our fall clergy retreat. The retreat is always a time for some rest and a time to connect with each other and with our Bishop, but we also use some of the time for education – to expand our horizons a bit and think about the world in some new way. To that end the Bishop invited the Rev. Dr. Bradley Hauff, an Episco-

pal priest for 27 years, a lifelong Episcopalian, and the current Missioner for Indigenous Peoples for the Episcopal Church, to speak to us. Brad, as he asked us to call him, is a Lakota-Sioux, a member of the Oglala tribe who grew up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

Brad shared with us a very painful story from his family history and I want to share it with you today as a way for us to think about how and when God “grants justice to his chosen ones,” as we hear Jesus say this morning. From the mid-1800s until the 1950s the United States licensed the creation of dozens of boarding schools on Indian reservations all over the country. The boarding schools were often operated by churches and the Episcopal Church operated over twenty of them, including one on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The stated purpose of these schools was take Indian children away from their parents and raise the children to think, act, and dress like Anglos. In short, the purpose was to strip away from them their cultural heritage.

Most children were taken at age 6 and kept until age 18. Most of them did not see their parents at all during those years because they were often hired out on work details during the summer and other school breaks. All too often the children were subjected to abuse. And ultimately the schools failed in their stated purpose. Racism in American culture meant that no matter how much a young Indian man or woman dressed, talked, and thought like a white person, the white people of America would still regard them as inferior.

Brad’s father was taken from his parents at age 6 to the Episcopal School that served Pine Ridge. Later in life he told Brad what he experienced. He said that every day for the first year that he was there he would walk down to the gate at the foot of the driveway and wait, watching for his parents to return to pick him up. Finally, after a year of waiting he understood that no one was coming for him. He would end up remaining there for the rest of his childhood, until he graduated high school at age 18. We can only imagine, with profound grief, how Brad’s father and so many other children cried out to God day and night for justice while they struggled through such conditions.

But before we address that issue more directly, I want to be sure you know why the U.S. Government, the Episcopal Church, and other churches and organizations engaged in this practice. Historians put the Indian boarding schools into a larger context of world history under the label of something called the “Doctrine of Discovery.” The Doctrine of Discovery was a series of decisions – some legal and some religious – made by Europeans in the decades after they first discovered what was, to them, the new world of the Americas. In its broadest sense the Doctrine of Discovery said that Europeans are racially superior to the native peoples of the

Americas and Africa and that God had given the Europeans the right to rule over, enslave, and convert to Christianity the peoples already living in any of the lands they discovered.

It was this broad set of laws and religious opinions that motivated the people of the United States to set up the boarding school system on the reservations. They believed they had both a God-given right and a responsibility to rule over people like the Lakota-Sioux and to make them, as much as possible, into their own image. The boarding schools were a major component of that effort.

But Brad didn't come to speak to us simply to tell us his father's story. He came, as part of his ministry as the National Missioner for Indigenous Peoples, to help us better understand a decision taken at the National Convention of the Episcopal Church back in 2009. At that convention the Church publicly and officially repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery and called for the church's repentance for our participation in it.

So Brad was there to help us better understand that decision and what it means, and by telling us his father's story he helped us better understand the sins that were committed. Some might say that such Convention resolutions are irrelevant to our modern world – I have heard some say “why dredge up the past? why talk about actions that were taken before we were even born?”

That brings us back to the persistent widow. The Episcopal Church has thousands of Indian members in hundreds of parishes on reservations all over the United States – from the Sioux nations to the Navajo to the Ojibwe and many others. Like the persistent widow, our Episcopalians from the Indian nations have been persistently asking, over many years, that the Episcopal Church acknowledge, repent, and seek healing for the sins committed against tens of thousands of people like Brad's father. Answering their persistent pleas with acknowledgement and repentance is one, small way in which God is granting justice to his chosen ones who call on him day and night.

We can't go back in time and change what happened to Brad's father and so many others, but for Brad's sake, for the sake of his family and his tribe, and for the sake of a better future for all of us, we can acknowledge that it happened, say that it was wrong, and express sorrow and repentance that our Church was involved in it.

I think this is one of the ways to understand what Jesus means when he says that God will grant justice to those who cry to him day and night. Justice begins to be born when a person, an institution, or a nation is able to look honestly at their past sins, seek forgiveness for them, and resolve to live in a better way going forward.

The repentance of the Episcopal Church may seem like a small thing but it is one part of the answer to the prayers that Brad's father, and so many thousands of others, offered up in the midst of their struggle.

May God grant us the grace to know our history so that we may not repeat those past mistakes in the generations to come.

Amen.