

Pentecost XXI (29C)  
*Jeremiah 31.23-34/Psalm 119.97-104/II Timothy 3.12-4.6/Luke 18.1-8*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
21 October 2007

## Getting What We Want

~Paul H. Friesen~

How can we get what we want? If we had an electronic sign board outside the church with programmable text (and I really *don't want* this) I would have programmed it myself this week. The bright red lights would scroll along the screen and spell out—'**21 October Sermon: Getting What you Want.**'

The self-help sections of our bookstores are full of suggestions about getting what we want. One of the older, famous books, tells the story of how to get what we want with its title--*How to Win Friends and Influence People*. But if we take notes from books like this, the talk about 'wanting' is not usually about the quality of what we want, or whether it would be good for us, but about *how* to get whatever it is we want. It is too often reduced to a technique—how effective can we be getting what we want?

This is true sometimes of Christian authors that promise us how to get the 'spiritual' things we want—by way of CDs, DVDs, websites, as well as books. Sometimes we hear from some of these authors or resources that God wants to fulfil our dreams—we just need fill in the blanks and follow the programme. But long ago John of the Cross talked about this in his book called *The Dark Night of the Soul*. He says that there is such a thing as 'spiritual greed'—wanting too much spiritual bliss too quickly—and that it is a sin. He's right. God's idea of what spiritual blessings we need is sometimes different from what we want.

The truth is that Christians are taught by the Scriptures that desire is a good thing—that 'wanting' is a part of the way we were created to be, by the Lord who made us in his own image.

In the famous story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve want things because they were created with desires. The problem was that at one critical point they wanted the wrong things in the wrong way. They wanted everything that

God had made, without limit, and they wanted it immediately.<sup>1</sup>

So the Law and the Prophets and then Jesus taught a whole lot about how to learn what is good for us and for others, and a whole lot about the right way to take hold of—to get—what we want.

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<sup>1</sup> *Genesis 1.27-31; 3.1-6.*

A German Lutheran book that influenced the first generation of Evangelical Anglicans was called *Pia Desideria* (best translated as ‘Pious Desires’ or ‘Godly Desires’).<sup>2</sup> This is a good place to begin. [In fact we have already been launched in the right direction by our music director’s choice of songs: ‘I want to be more thankful...I want to be more loving...I want to be more joyful, deep down in my heart.’] [The choices by our traditional music director will take us in this direction at the end of the Eucharist: ‘I looked to Jesus and I found/In him my Star, my sun.’ The hymn writer wanted Jesus.] This ‘wanting’ is good.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus told a story about how to pray for what we want. He chose an odd story, about a widow who nagged a judge. The story helps us to answer two big questions. The first is: *What should we desire—i.e. what should we want?* And the second question is: *How should we get what we want?*

*First, what should we want?* The widow points us in the right direction: ‘Grant me justice.’ We don’t know anything about this woman’s spiritual life or how holy she was or what she deserved.

We can know that the widow’s desire for justice was good, because God is a just judge—a judge who sees us all with unbiased eyes. These days we use the language of ‘rights’ a lot—that we have a right to this or that. This is very necessary in politics to keep us all on our toes. But we can easily slip into thinking that we have a right to certain possessions, and a certain kind of house, and a certain kind of life style, and a certain state of emotion or feeling—all these things, as soon as possible. We are, all of us, influenced by what we call ‘consumerism’ in surprising ways. We become frustrated when we can’t afford to buy things, or if the things we want are things that can’t be bought.

The widow in the parable wanted a fair legal decision. Though her desire was good, she was in a weak position.<sup>3</sup> In those days women didn’t deal with judges unless they had no male relative willing to stand up for them. She had none. And people didn’t keep coming back to a judge unless they had no money for a bribe. She had no money for a bribe. It was only her desire for something good, something created by God—justice—that kept her desire alive. She finally got what she wanted because it was right that she had it—she was created to be treated with justice.

Well, if the widow wanted something good, something she was created to have, it is important to say that God wants good things for us in the first place. In the prophecy from Jeremiah we hear God’s voice. God wanted nothing less than a *new heart* for them.

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<sup>2</sup> It was written by Philip Spener and published in 1675 in Frankfurt. It helped the German ‘Pietist’ movement come into being, whose effect helped create the German ‘Moravian’ movement of spiritual renewal led by Count Zinzendorf, which in turn made a big impact on John and Charles Wesley, the best known Anglican priests of the first Evangelical generation (1730s and following).

<sup>3</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p.640.

What did God really want? God wanted his heart to be written on their hearts. God wanted divine ways to be written on human hearts. God wanted us to live like an old married couple who know each other's thoughts before either moves a lip. God wants to be in communion with us.

God said to Jeremiah: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord", for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest.'

We can't go wrong if we want what God wants for us. To know what God takes us down to the roots of all true desires. God wants to be in communion with him. God wants our hearts to beat with the divine heart. We can't go wrong if this is what we want. We can't go wrong if we go below other good desires to the best of them all: 'they shall know me' the Lord said to Jeremiah. There is no desire that can be greater than this. This is what we really want, underneath the mess made by our smaller, conflicting desires. So this is what we need to aim for.

*The second question was: How should we get what we want?*

In the Gospel parable about the widow, we hear, 'Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart.' It is easy to lose heart, even for good desires, even the best desire.

Jesus said that the unjust judge, the corrupt judge who held the widow's fate in his hand, finally granted a fair legal decision in the case of someone who wanted to destroy her. The widow was persistent—and how much has been accomplished in world politics because of persistence like this. You can see it revealed for instance in the letters addressed by black Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu to the white leaders of South Africa in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> There is astonishing persistence in Tutu's voice and life. He just won't give up.

After the parable Jesus said: 'And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?'

God is not an unjust judge, open to bribes (even the powerful spiritual bribes of religious people); he is not a powerful official who wants to hold out on granting us what we rightly desire. So, said Jesus, if the widow got what she wanted from a wicked judge, it is certainly true that God will grant our true desires.

God made us. God loves us. God hears us. God wants us to grant the desires that are good for us and good for those around us.

So, what's the problem? Because it's true that 'we can't always get what we want'.<sup>5</sup> And it seems true even if our desires are right—even if our desire is for communion with God. We can't seem to feel God in communion with us.

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<sup>4</sup> Desmond Tutu, *The Rainbow People of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> With apologies to the *Rolling Stones*.

The answer comes at the end of Jesus' parable: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' God wants us to have our true desires fulfilled. And God wants the deepest desire to be met, to be in communion. But like any human relationship, our communion with God requires us to change. It requires a life of faithful persistence. Its no good wanting to know a friend better, if we continue to do all the talking. Its no good wanting to know a friend better if we don't want that friendship to change us.

We read in the New Testament, over and over again, that the church is not composed of those of a similar background, or similar finances, or the same views on things, or the same gifts, or the same age. Coming together as a church changes us. If it doesn't change us we need to change. Coming together with God will transform us. We can't remain the same.

*How do we get what we want?* If we want communion with God, Jeremiah said, we will need to hear this: 'They shall know me...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.' Change refreshes us and renews us, but it can be painful.

There are no shortcuts to a new heart that beats with God's heart. There are no shortcuts to communion with God. That is why as Anglican Christians we make sure there is always at least one opportunity in every service, every Eucharist, every liturgy a moment of confession and the assurance of forgiveness. This is a key that opens the door into our desires.

St. Paul's Church is blessed beyond belief. For over 250 years this has been a place of faith, and it has been a stubborn and persistent faith when it has needed to be. At the heart of its worship is a desire to be in communion with God. And the community has in its finest hours wanted this together.

God is shaping us through our worship. God is fitting us for deeper and deeper communion with him and with each other.

We shouldn't be surprised that the route to our true, deep desires demands changes of us, demands confession and forgiveness. We shouldn't be surprised that God smoothes our sharp edges by brushing us up against each other. This is how God fits us to enter into true desire, above all true communion with him and with each other.

St. Paul's Church is blessed beyond belief right now. We have faithful and creative staff, worship leaders, wardens, and volunteers of all kinds. We have services of worship weekly. We have a parish retreat coming up. We have a five part mid-week study in various homes. We have a Sunday School. We have a number of outreach ministries. We have a persistent faith in the meaning of our heritage, our buildings, our location. We have a parish plan that is evolving.

God urges all of us to not miss the opportunity to see our desires granted through these faithful opportunities. Thanks be to God!

Let us praise the Lord with all that we have this morning—hands, voice, feet, minds and our hearts—a symphony of praise to God.