

*A Matter of Character*  
A Pentecost 21 Sermon  
Luke 18:1-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34  
Sunday, October 21, 2007  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

Americans have a fascination with anything to do about that illusive and yet essential ideal we call “justice.”

This past Wednesday, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi presented the Congressional Gold Honor, its highest civilian honor, to the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader who has lived in exile outside of Tibet since March of 1959. In ceremonies in the Capitol Rotunda, speeches in his honor were given by President Bush, members of both political parties, and by other dignitaries including Elie Wiesel, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate like the Dalai Lama.

The extraordinary occasion fell against the backdrop of furious objections to the ceremonies by the Chinese government which forced the Dalai Lama to leave Tibet forty-eight years ago. In response to the Chinese, the president said, “I don’t think it ever damages relations when an American president talks about...religious tolerance and religious freedom is good for a nation. I do this every time I meet with him.”<sup>1</sup> For many Americans, the welcoming and honoring of the Dalai Lama was a matter of character, a matter of justice.

While both political parties seemed united in ignoring the angry and provocative statements coming from Beijing, the parties were much further apart in agreeing on an appropriate response to another divisive issue – whether or not the deaths of between 1 – 1.5 million Christian Armenians in 1915 by the Ottoman Turkish nation should be defined as “genocide.” If China was angry about the Dalai Lama, the government of Turkey was even more so about the possibility that the House of Representatives might pass this non-binding resolution.

The *New York Times* writes that “the facts of the events are accepted by almost all historians, who have labeled the killings genocide – the systematic

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<sup>1</sup> President George W. Bush, “Press Conference by the President,” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Wednesday, October 17, 2007, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071017.html>.

elimination of an ethnic group. But the modern Turkish government, heir to the remains of the Ottoman empire, has steadfastly objected to the charge...in part because of the implicit comparison with Hitler's Germany, and in part because the criticisms seemed to threaten the foundation of a state pulled together out of the anarchy of the Ottoman collapse."<sup>2</sup>

In this case, the situation remains unresolved. The White House does not want to alienate an ally it believes is essential in fighting the war on terrorism in the Middle East while some members of Congress believe it is an important matter of character and justice. If we can stand up to China on the matter of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan issue, why are we reluctant to stand up to Turkey when it comes to the Armenian genocide?

On Thursday retired federal judge Michael Mukasey, President Bush's nominee for attorney general, met with members of the Senate Judiciary Committee and presented his views on a wide variety of legal issues, including torture. One of the pointed exchanges came when Judge Mukasey refused to say if he considered "waterboarding," an interrogation technique that simulates drowning, to be legally defined as torture.

His testimony pleased both supporters and critics at different times. At one point on the first day Judge Mukasey cited a famous case that was argued before the Supreme Court<sup>3</sup> in 1952 in which Associate Justice Robert H. Jackson's concurrence with the majority opinion has become an accepted hallmark in the debate about the separation between the powers of the executive and legislative branches. Justice Jackson wrote that "the president has the most power when he acts with Congressional authorization, ...and an intermediate amount when Congress is silent. The president's power is at its 'lowest ebb,' [Justice Jackson wrote] ...when Congress has forbidden a particular action."<sup>4</sup>

Those comments would obviously please those who believe that the president and the Department of Justice must live within the parameters set

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<sup>2</sup> John Holusha, "Armenian Genocide," *World, New York Times*, Wednesday, October 17, 2007, [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/turkey/armenian\\_genocide/index.html?8qa](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/turkey/armenian_genocide/index.html?8qa).

<sup>3</sup> See "Youngstown Sheet & Tube v. Sawyer," U. S. Supreme Court.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Liptak, "Plainly, a Justice Department Pick of Like Mind," *New York Times*, Saturday, October 20, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/20/washington/20mukasey.html?ex=1193544000&en=fe3e7397eec5f6c9&ei=5070&emc=eta1>.

by the law. During other parts of his testimony, however, Judge Mukasey seemed to also argue the opposite – that the president’s authority as commander in chief might allow him to supersede laws written by Congress.

Senator Patrick Leahy, chair of the Judiciary Committee, noted that when he said, “In your answers yesterday, there was a very bright line on questions of torture and the ability of an executive, or inability of an executive, to ignore the law. That seems nowhere near as bright a line today, and maybe I just don’t understand.”<sup>5</sup>

The phrase “bright line” has become a popular one in Congress over the past several years in referring to achieving absolute clarity about important matters.

We all want that bright line, don’t we? We want to believe that there is such a thing as absolute clarity about some matters? We want to believe that the Constitution will absolutely be interpreted in ways so as to protect the rights of the great number of citizens. We want to believe that if a case is argued before one of our courts that the judge will be fair and impartial. We want to believe that there is some inner principle, a matter of character, perhaps, that will always lead us to the right place in matters of justice – whether it be on issues of international affairs, domestic politics, business, church, or our individual lives.

There’s a joke about a prosecuting attorney who calls his first witness to the stand – in this case a widow. He approaches her and asks, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?” She responds, “Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy and frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie, cheat on your wife, manipulate people, and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a rising star in the legal profession when in truth you haven’t the brains to realize you never will amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, I know you.” The lawyer is stunned to silence. Not knowing what else to do he points across the room and asks, “Mrs. Williams, do you know the defense attorney sitting over there?” The widow again replies, “Why, yes I do. I’ve known Mrs. Bradley since she was a youngster like you. I even used to baby-sit her for her parents. But like you, she’s been a real disappointment

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Shenon, “Senators Clash With Nominee About Torture,” New York Times, Friday, October 19, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/19/washington/19mukasey.html>.

to me. She's lazy, bigoted, and has a drug problem. She's on her fifth marriage in ten years and her law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know her." At this point, the judge gavels the courtroom to silence and calls both counselors to the bench. In a very quiet voice and stern voice, he says, "If either of you asks her if she knows me, you'll be jailed for contempt of court!"

Jesus tells a parable about a certain judge, a man whom Jesus describes as neither fearing God nor having any respect for people. It so happens that the judge is beset by a widow who keeps coming to him asking for justice against her opponent. For a long time he puts her off, but she refuses to go away.

Biblical scholar Alan Culpepper tells us that in ancient Israel "judges were charged with the responsibility of hearing complaints fairly and impartially, a duty that was all the more important because they adjudicated cases without the benefit of a jury. Deuteronomy reports Moses' charge to judges: 'Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's' (Deut 1:16-17). The judge's responsibility within the covenant community, therefore, was to declare God's judgment and establish *shalom* among God's people"<sup>6</sup> – especially those in need.

When Jesus describes the judge as neither fearing God nor having respect for anyone, he is already disabusing his audience of the idealistic notion that earthly justice is above reproach. He is saying in effect that "this judge is completely unfit for his position."<sup>7</sup>

The surprise in the parable comes in the judge's soliloquy or interior monologue: "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone," he says to himself, "yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." And this judge, from whom Jesus already has suggested that we not expect very much, does the right thing – not because he knew where that bright line is,

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<sup>6</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 336. Dr. Culpepper is Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

not because he had suddenly been filled with compassion because of her plight, not because he was suddenly living up to his sacred responsibilities as a judge of Israel, but because of the amazing persistence of this woman who would not let him alone.

Dr. Culpepper says, “If even such an arrogant judge will eventually respond to the widow, then how could one doubt that God will vindicate such ‘little ones’ against those who inflict hardship upon them or fail to do what is in their power to ease their plight? The just God does not protect the property interests of the privileged but is compassionate and looks out for those who have no power to leverage privileges from the powerful. The way of the kingdom, therefore, calls for priorities based on compassion.”<sup>8</sup>

The first main point of the parable is that justice is rooted and grounded in the very nature of God. It is a matter of character – God’s character, in fact.

And the second main point of the parable is also about a matter of character – ours, as the people of God. In the face of injustice in human society, Jesus warns us not to rely on earthly justice but “on the importance of praying persistently, earnestly, and without losing heart...or on the assurance that God will answer those who pray day and night.”<sup>9</sup>

Culpepper asks, “How does God hear our prayers if they are self-centered, concerned only with petty issues, or irrelevant to God’s redemptive purposes? To those who are worn out, hard pressed, and lacking in hope, Jesus says to pray night and day. Unlike an unjust judge, God cares about the plight of those who are regarded unimportant by others. To those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow, the orphan, the stranger but do not, the call to pray night and day is a command to let the priorities of God’s compassion reorder the priorities of their lives.”<sup>10</sup>

In preparation for welcoming new members this morning, we held a membership class where the pastors provided a basic orientation to the United Methodist Church and to this church in particular. Debbie Gara also asked for them to provide her with information they would feel comfortable having her share about them during the service. One of them, Tony, who had already told the class that he is gay, asked her a question in return – and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 339.

I share this story with you with his permission. He asked if his partner Gary, with whom he has been for seventeen years, could stand with him. One of our other new members, Melanie, said, “I think you should start the way you want to be.” Debbie, of course, said, “Yes.”

When Debbie told me about this conversation, I was in the midst of preparing this sermon about justice and persistent prayer. There are many United Methodists across the country who have been looking forward to the day when our church will be completely open to all persons without regard to sexual orientation – just as in the past we have worked to be open to all regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, socio-economic status, and handicapping conditions. As your pastor and senior minister, I count myself as one of those persons, without qualification, without apology.

But I found myself wondering what would happen by Tony’s honest witness. I’m beginning to know you, of course, but I haven’t talked about this matter of justice with very many. I found myself wondering how our church responds to the plight of all those who are regarded as unimportant by others. Because we do have it within our power and our witness to work at relieving the distress not only of the widow, the orphan, the poor, hungry, or oppressed, but also of all those in the great category the Bible refers to as the “stranger” or the “alien” – those whom God may intentionally send our way in order that we might more closely reflect the mercy and grace of the kingdom of God, and in order that those very strangers and aliens become part of us.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a nationally renowned preacher and author, tells a story about her 7-year-old granddaughter, Madeline. “What I want Madeline to know is that the best thing about prayer is the relationship itself. Whether or not she gets what she asks for, I want her to keep asking. I want her to pester God the same way she pesters her mother, thinking of 12 different ways to plead her case. I want her to long for God the same way she longs for her father, holding fast to him even when his chair is empty. When she complains that none of this does any good, I am going to ask her to tell me the difference between how she feels while she is praying versus how she feels when she thinks about giving up. If I am lucky, she is going to tell me that she feels more alive when she is praying, and that is when I

will tell her the story about the persistent widow...”<sup>11</sup>

Bishop William Willimon says, “If we really believed in the power of prayer, if we really believed that prayer can effect world peace, if we were truly convinced that prayer changes things, heals broken lives and restores severed relationships, then we would be praying constantly. You couldn’t keep us from praying.”<sup>12</sup>

It’s all a matter of character – God’s and ours!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Bothering God,” *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999, 356.

<sup>12</sup> William Willimon, from the sermon “On Not Losing Heart,” October 18, 1998, <http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=94>. Mr. Willimon, who is now the Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, preached this sermon when he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University in Durham, N.C.