

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who reveals the Kingdom of God to us, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Ever since PJ and I went on our second trip to the Holy Land and our tour guide was a PhD Archeologist, I've been curious about new archeological discoveries from the Middle eastern area. I read about a new discovery this week. In this new case, she was an elderly woman. She was about 50 years old when she died and pretty well-preserved, although a bit dried out. Not likely to attract much attention. Granted, 50 is not so old - unless you're living 3,000 years ago in ancient Egypt. This 50-year-old woman was recently found in a burial chamber in an Egyptian cemetery. Not in a great pyramid, but an ordinary cemetery. For someone who'd been buried for three thousand years, she looked remarkably well-preserved. Yet even to archaeologists, she was not likely to attract much attention because she appeared to be an average, every day, garden-variety mummy ... until someone noticed the odd-looking big toe on her right foot. It was totally artificial. It consisted of three pieces of carved wood fitted onto her foot with leather straps, making it the world's oldest known prosthesis. The wooden toe still looked ready for use, still lashed to the patient's mummified toe by a leather lace.

For paleontologists and pathologists around the world, this big toe was big news. X-rays revealed the Egyptian woman's actual toe had been surgically removed, perhaps because artery disease had cut off circulation to the toe. Soft

tissue and skin had overgrown the site where the toe had been taken off, and then the prosthetic toe had been added. She must've been a persistent woman to go to all the trouble! Evidence shows that the device must've worked. Scuff marks on the toe's underside indicate that the artificial toe had assisted the woman for some time while she was alive. Without it, she would have had a very difficult time walking like an Egyptian.

Prayer is not a prosthesis or a crutch that allows a shaky faith to remain standing. Instead, it's a practice that connects us to a power that can fill us, change us, strengthen us and guide us. Two thousand years ago, there was another persistent woman of record, who evidently didn't have trouble getting around like this mummy did. Say what you want, but she was persistent. A pain in the um... neck. A pest. Yet, Jesus uses her for an instructive lesson. Like a terrier at your cuff, she sunk in her teeth, snarling to the judge handling her case: "Grant me justice against my opponent."

Finally, the judge couldn't stand it anymore. "I have no fear of God," he admitted to himself. He even confessed that he didn't care for people. This Judge didn't keep either of Jesus' great commandments, to love God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves. He said to no one in particular, "Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice". He simply wanted to get her out of his hair, because she was wearing him out with her continual griping. The

widow's pleas were like a big wooden toe, one that kept jabbing and jabbing and jabbing away. She somehow had faith that if she pestered this judge long enough he would give in.

Finally it happened... "Enough!" shouted the judge. "I get the point!" In a sense, so does God. "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" asks Jesus. "Will he delay long in helping them?" Of course not! "I tell you," Jesus insists, "He will quickly grant justice to them". Jesus is saying if a corrupt and uncaring judge responds to persistent pleas, then certainly a holy and loving Lord will do the same. Yet Jesus adds a nuance here easily overlooked. Whereas the earthly judge delays, God will act quickly. God does not need to be browbeaten into submission before he hears our prayers. Scripture tells us: Ask and it shall be given; Seek and you shall find; Knock and the door will be opened to you.

That's why prayer is not a prosthesis or a kind of a crutch for people to lean on as they try to keep their faith from falling over. Prayer might be the big toe of faith, but there's nothing artificial about it, and we don't need to use it to be kicking God in the shins trying to get his attention. Prayer is rather the critical stabilizing keel of the sailing ship that keeps our faith upright, that keeps us in the game, that positions us to receive from God what he wants us to have. Prayer is a practice that connects us to a power much greater than ourselves, a power that can

fill us and change us and strengthen us and guide us. Prayer is a practice that is perfected by persistence - by disciplined determination to be in an ongoing conversation with God.

Where has the persistent widow showed up in your life? Or, maybe better, who has been the persistent widow in your life? Do your children or grandchildren wear you down until you finally give in to their demands? I'll tell you now that they're mostly downstairs and can't hear me, I can't resist their persistent requests for more than about 5 seconds... We all have a persistent person wearing us down from time to time in our lives. In the story as Jesus tells it, the judge grants her request not from a change of heart, or any particular sympathy for her or her cause, but from fear that she will tarnish – literally, give a black eye to – his public image. Yes, this parable is about persistence, but it's true main point is really about faith. Jesus asks, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” The Bible tells us “the righteous shall live by faith.” For followers of Jesus Christ, faith is a way of life—faith is the way of life of fearing God and respecting neighbor and trusting in God's goodness and power, even while being surrounded by injustice. The clear promise is that God's goodness and power will prevail in the end. The challenge for us who want to follow Jesus in this lost and very broken world is to live in this vale of tears, fearing God, respecting neighbor, seeking to do justice, and trusting that in the end God's will shall be done. Our challenge is to live out

our days in this unjust world having faith, trusting in the eternal promises of our loving God.

What do you think? When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on earth? It's a good question. Will he find, in each of us, the Big Toe of Faith? May we continue to learn from the teaching and example of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ how to exercise our saving faith so that when He returns, if it be in our lifetime, he will find, not just a mustard seed of faith, but a robust faith in us that can move mountains and soften hardened hearts. May your prayer life be strong and persistent and grounded in loving God and our neighbors. May we always be a people seeking to root out injustice and to do justice when it's within our power to do so. Amen.