

Sermon - October 20, 2019 – SOSA Sunday

This is our annual SOSA Sunday, the one day in the year where we lift up the Service, Outreach, and Social Action of Bells Corners United Church. The service is planned and organized by our SOSA committee. You will have been greeted by its members as you came in the door this morning and you will hear their voices during our worship service. They are a hard-working group of folks who quietly and persistently go about the business of keeping eyes and ears open to the needs of the community and of the wider world, and they are in the business of finding opportunities for this congregation of Jesus followers to make a difference in the lives of our neighbours. It is, in my opinion, one of the most important committees of this congregation – and yet one of the least known. Perhaps this is partly because we tend to talk of it in the acronym, SOSA, without spelling out what those letters stand for...Service, Outreach, and Social Action... Maybe it's because these folks who work so tirelessly are humble and not good at tooting their own horns... They tend to be focussed on the work rather than the show. They have taken the message of Jesus to "love your neighbour" to heart, and so they get out there and show that love wherever possible. When we hear from them, it is about the needs they see and the projects that need our support. The bulletin board in the hallway highlights each of these projects at different times of the year and, on SOSA Sunday they bring in a guest speaker who can give us an in-depth look at one of those ongoing projects.

Well, we have changed the format a bit this year. You may have noticed that there is no "guest speaker" – just me! Instead of highlighting one agency, we want to focus on the work of SOSA as a whole and perhaps give you some ideas about how you can become involved beyond your generous response to our special projects during Advent and Lent each year. I know that Clarke will be introducing the members of the committee and what they do in a little bit, so I don't want to go into those details now. I want to focus more on why this work is so important to who we are as a church and what we stand for. Each person on this committee acts as a liaison with a group or agency working in our community – and, more than information gathering, they actually volunteer in those groups. They also keep up to date on issues that concern all of us – refugee families, indigenous rights and the truth and reconciliation process, the conflict in Palestine and Israel, the work and research around a Basic Income strategy, even the needs and concerns of our neighbours as far away as Zambia – and I know I have barely scratched the surface.

It seems that the needs in the world are great – and it seems like they will never go away. Sometimes, I'm sure, we all feel that the work we do is not making a lot of difference. It would be easy to give up, to turn our backs on the plight of our neighbours and just concentrate on making the best of what we have in our own lives... but then we read a story like the one in today's gospel passage from Luke and we are urged to think again. A persistent widow and an unjust judge...

In this parable that the author of Luke tells us Jesus told his listeners, we meet a judge who really doesn't give a damn about the people in his jurisdiction. He admits it himself. It's a pretty cushy job, being a judge and I'm sure he does the basic things that he must in order to keep it –

but it seems as if the prestige and lifestyle that come with this title are more important to him than the actual work itself. I can imagine him spending the requisite hours listening to people plead their cause and then quickly passing a judgement without really taking the time to listen and understand, without giving any thought to how his judgement will affect the people who have come to him for justice. “Tell me your story. I will decide what should happen and then you will disappear and bother me no more.” We can give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that he does, at the very least, follow the rule of law... and likely to the letter. If this, then that... end of story.

It’s right there in the title of this passage – he is an “unjust judge”. Justice isn’t what concerns him. It’s all about getting the job done and moving along. In those days – and for the most part even today – the authority of a judge is pretty powerful and not something that is easy to question. And I imagine that most of the people who came before him were representing themselves. We don’t hear much about defense lawyers or prosecution lawyers in our Biblical stories. Both sides are really at the mercy – or the whim - of the judge. And it probably all worked pretty well for that unjust judge... until this pesky widow came along. She wouldn’t take no for an answer. She kept turning up day after day, week after week, pleading for justice until he finally gave her what she wanted just to get rid of her.

Now think about it... this persistent person had a lot going against her! Just the fact that she was female in those times meant that she had very little power outside of her family unit. On top of that she was a widow which meant she had no resources or protection other than the charity of those around her. In this little story, Jesus has pitted one of the most weak against one of the most powerful – and because of her persistence, justice was finally given.

Jesus’ message is loud and clear:

Don’t give up!

Now, to be fair, Jesus isn’t telling this story to urge his listeners to get what they want by being a pain in the butt. He is talking about prayer. If persistence can sway this unjust judge, he tells them, then think of how much more responsive God will be to your pleas, to your prayers.

Prayer... what is that all about anyway? Is it anything more than our pleading and bargaining with God? I think it is. I see prayer as an active thing, not a passive one.

C.S. Lewis, the man who wrote the wonderful Narnia series beginning with “The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe”, was more than a children’s author. He was also a theologian. He is quoted as saying, “I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.”

When we take the time to pray, to have that important conversation with God, it helps us lay out the problem or the need in our own minds too. Letting go of the anxiety or the anger or the pain and giving that to God in prayer can give us the peace and the energy we need to perhaps

look at the problem from a new perspective. Our faith in that higher power gives us the hope that something can be done to make change happen... and our attention to the words of Jesus let us know without a doubt that we have to be part of the solution.

As followers of Jesus, we know that the answer isn't always going to come in the form of an instant miracle but that it will likely involve some work on our part. When we follow the example of Jesus, the *servant* king, we know that it is important for us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and house the homeless. We know that we are called to welcome the stranger, and comfort the afflicted. We know we are expected to move outside of our comfortable sanctuary and meet the people on the margins. And we know that it's important that we *Never give up*. But Jesus' call to us doesn't end there. We are also called to do the kind of work to make the kind of change that lasts... change in the hearts and minds of the people around us, in the leadership that governs us, in society as a whole.

I am reminded of a story, perhaps it is one you have heard...

There was a village where the people worked hard to make life good for everyone in the community. They all helped in the fields to grow the food they needed. Some people also wove blankets to keep people warm, and others helped to build shelters against the cold of winter. The villagers looked out for each other and helped to raise each other's children. The people lived together in harmony. It was a great place to live.

One summer in this village, the people gathered for a picnic. The adults busied themselves with spreading out blankets and preparing the food and keeping an eye on the children as they played down by the river – the older ones watching the littler ones as they splashed on the shore. Suddenly there was a commotion down by the water and one of the teenagers jumped into the river and came out holding a very frightened and crying baby! As the adults rushed to help, they noticed another screaming baby in the river, and they pulled that baby out. Soon, more babies were seen drowning in the river, and the townspeople were pulling them out as fast as they could. It took great effort, and they began to organize their activities in order to save the babies as they came down the river. Some people were in the water catching the babies as they floated downstream, others were passing them to folks on the shore ready to wrap them in blankets and find them some food.

As everyone was busy in the rescue efforts to save the babies, someone looked up and noticed that two of the strongest and most capable townspeople were running away along the shore of the river.

"Where are you going?" shouted one of the rescuers. "We need you here to help us save these babies!"

"We are going upstream to stop whoever is throwing them in!"

Taking care of the immediate needs of those babies was absolutely crucial and couldn't be halted... but something also needed to be done to ensure that babies were no longer being thrown in the river... That's the Social Action part of Jesus' message and of SOSA's mandate - Service, Outreach, ...and Social Action.

So many jobs we are called to do – and not one more important or necessary than the others.

Every job needs people who are willing to work and to be persistent.

Never give up.

On this SOSA Sunday, I hope that you will listen to the folks of this hard-working committee and find a place where you think you could help. Sometimes it is overwhelming to think of joining a committee – especially one that is involved in so much! But maybe there is one thing there that piques your interest... one place where you think you have the time or the energy or the skills to help. Perhaps there's an area that you'd like to learn more about and work with others to find good ways forward.

As Clarke introduces the members of the SOSA committee in a few minutes, take note of the work each of them is involved in and make a point of following up with them at coffee time or by giving them a phone call or dropping them an email. They are passionate about the work they do and would love to share that passion with you.

They aren't about to give up. They are every bit as persistent as the widow in our story – and you may just be the answer to their prayers. After all, this is the work of the church – the work of all of us - not just those on one committee.

The work is hard at times – but it is also very rewarding. And many hands – and minds - make the work lighter. This is work that is not going to go away overnight. It will always be important work for each one of us.

It takes persistence – the kind of persistence shown by that widow. Our neighbours need us...

And we must never give up.

Amen.