

Genesis 32: 22-31  
Psalm: 121  
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5  
Luke 18: 1-8

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### Persisting

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Surely you're heard that "Well-behaved women seldom make history." Perhaps you have the kitchen magnet, seen the bumper sticker, or worn the tee shirt.

The observation was first made by Harvard history professor Laurel Thatcher in a 1976 research paper about Puritan funeral rituals in reference to the invisible women who "...spent their time living quietly and virtuously, giving no speeches, attending no colleges, casting no votes...hoping for an eternal crown, they never asked to be remembered on earth. And they haven't been."

This is not the fate of the persistent widow in today's parable, who secured her place in in Luke's gospel with not only her persistence, but her righteous anger. Widows, as most of you know, had no rights in the ancient world under Jewish law. Any inheritance would have gone to the widow's sons and brothers-in-law. While we don't know for a fact, it's a safe bet that her desperation may have a something to do with being unprotected, betrayed and destitute.

The judge, who admits to not caring about either God or anyone else, gives in to get rid of her. He's literally saving face, in a sense because in this text in Greek, the judge said he does not want to be worn out "with continued blows under the eye." The widow's angry protests – "No justice, no peace" are landing hard, giving the unrighteous judge a "black eye" and he can't tolerate the humiliation.

Author and pastor Nadia Bolz Weber explains the quickest way to misread this text:

It's tempting to look straight on and see the story of the persistent widow as self-help technique by which we can get all the cash and prizes we want out of God's divine vending machine if we just kind of bug God to death through ceaseless prayer. When we come down to it though, we know better.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bolz-Weber, Nadia

And indeed we do. But in the end it's hard not to lose hope when we slam into the mystery of prayer. In my ten years at the hospital, I have surely prayed many, many, days, ceasing for all the usual reasons, but steadily and hopefully with patients and for patients who still died.

And yet, I'm never without hope. Here is one of the ways I relate to the widow. As author and theologian Debie Thomas suggests:

The widow's only power in this story is the power of showing up. The power of sheer grit. But the story suggests that this power is not to be taken lightly. Which is to say, prayer is not to be taken lightly. We can't always know what gets shaken, transformed, upended, or vindicated simply because we show up again and again in prayer.<sup>2</sup>

Prayer connects us to God, and I believe "hammers us into a vessel that will be able to hold the answer when it comes." in the words of the legendary preacher and scholar Fred Craddock. That's enough for me along with the certainty that prayer makes me a more loving, compassionate, and humble person.

The idea that upended whatever notions I had about this parable was to imagine God, as the personification of the persistent widow, and yes, you and me as the judge who neither fears God nor has respect for people. It's a distinctly uncomfortable thought. Debie Thomas explains:

Can I honestly profess that I'm never indifferent, irritable, closed off or unsympathetic? Is it really the case that my heart is always open to the pain and brokenness of others? Don't I self-protect? Police my borders quite compulsively? Don't I say "It's not my problem. Someone else will take care of it?"<sup>3</sup>

Ouch. That self-scrutiny is painful. I think of when I change channels rather absorb more of the suffering in Ukraine, when I assume the panhandler near 30<sup>th</sup> St. will use the money for drugs and am grateful when the light turns green. And when I ask what difference does another vigil to against gun violence make the distance between the judge and my hardening heart feel short.

If as Christians we believe that God not only hears the cries of the helpless but "God is *in* the cries of the helpless," then it is not a stretch to see as Thomas explains that:

God is in the wronged widow, crying for justice, pleading with me to listen, to care, to keep my heart open on her behalf....in this sense, prayer is first and foremost for *me*. Prayer is the fist that breaks down the doors of my own stubborn and sinful resistance. Prayer is what enables the light of God's compassion to illuminate the darkest and most oppressed corners of human life with hope and compassion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas, Debie, "Journey With Jesus," A weekly webzine for the global church since 2004, Oct. 13th, 2019

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

All the readings this morning are united in the theme of persistence: Jacob, persisting with the dark angel until a blessing is granted, the steadfastness of God's persistence as our keeper who in Psalm 121, "neither slumber nor sleep" and in Timothy, we're admonished to be "persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable."

And yet, and yet. How often do I grow weary? This is one reason why we pray in community, why we are strong as a parish because when we are united in prayer as we are Sunday after Sunday and through prayer on the days, like Wednesdays in our Healing Service, our weariness is blunted by our collective hope and the power of the Holy Spirit calling us into "the divine dance."

God, like the persistent widow will not give up on us. We have to keep fighting for the realization of God's kingdom on this earth.

And it is worth noting that the passage that precedes this parable in Luke is about the end of the age and the coming of God's kingdom on earth. It's not for the faint-hearted, with talk of "two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left," and, similarly with the women grinding meal, "one will be taken, and the other left."

The disciples ask "But where?" and Jesus says mystifyingly, "Where the corpse is there the vultures will gather."

And with that he leaps into the parable about the persistent widow.

So while we look to parables as lessons for us, and they often are, it's important to remember that Jesus may also be acknowledging that the kingdom of God will not survive without *us*.

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor says she keeps returning to Jesus' "...sad little question at the end of the parable. And yet, when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?"<sup>5</sup>

Because unless we pray always and do not lose heart, the answer to whether or not the Son of Man will find faith on earth is probably not.                    AMEN

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Home by Another Way*, Cowley Publications, 1999, pp.203-204

