

When Persistence Knocks: How Will You Respond? **Luke 18: 1-8**

Prayer: From the words of Steve Garnaas-Holmes, let us pray.

“Persistent God, help us listen to your cries in the poor,
to your whisperings in our hearts, to the light in your silence.

We still our minds, cease our judging, and listen.

In our hearts, a river flowing, we listen.

In the unsaid billion prayers, we listen.

We keep praying and do not lose heart.”

Act 1:

Widow: (Knocks) Mr. Judge, Mr. Judge, Mr. Judge— please let me in. Please, I beg you - listen to me. I need your protection. My rights have been violated. With no husband, father or any sons to support me, I need you to please hear me and advocate for me! I need justice!

Judge: Not again! This widow has come to me many times. Why can't she just leave me alone? Every time she comes, I am just ticked off by her badgering and pestering.

(To the widow). Go away! Stop bothering me! Go plead your case to someone else who will listen to you!

I grew up in a culture where it was considered improper and impolite to be a bother or to pester someone. As a child, I liked to discuss with older people but, of course, most often than not, I was shushed to keep silent because children are not supposed to discuss with adults. I was taught to be nice- not to argue – not to be demanding. Those who stir the pot or open a can of worms are sometimes ridiculed. You aren't supposed to do too much whining or complaining because, after all, no one ever said life was fair.

Yet here in this week's gospel lesson, which is uniquely Lukan, we find Jesus condoning this kind of behavior— that of persistent pestering and never-ending bothering. In this parable, we see a widow who incessantly bothers a judge to listen to her case. She was a victim of injustice. Day after day she would come to ask the judge to advocate for her. Day after day, the judge refuses to help her. But she persists, tirelessly bothering the judge until he is sick of her very presence: “I will grant her justice,” he says to himself, “so that she may not wear me out”. The literal translation in Greek is this: “so that she won't give me a black eye”. Luke seems to be saying that advocating for justice is messy work- one that entails a process that can be long,

wearisome, and frustrating.

At the outset, Luke tells us that this parable is about Jesus teaching his followers “the need to pray always and not lose heart.” But this is troubling. Are we really supposed to harass God until we wear God down? Is that what prayer is — bothering a hardhearted God until God caves in? When I receive an answer to prayer, is it only because God is sick to death of hearing my voice, and wants me to shut up? As I reflect on this parable, I know one thing for sure. This is not about a nagging prayer directed at an unwilling God. But rather a plea to a God who bears the suffering of people with them. For years I have cheered this woman, who will not be silenced. One who does not sit in her room contenting herself with tears and sorrow. This persistent widow would not let that arrogant judge get away with being heartless. Her power is found in her way of not being discouraged. Whose hope is rigorous and relentless.

Blogger Rev. Peter Woods has given me some helpful insights about the context of this parable. He contends that this is a strange story. We cannot comprehend what it was to be a widow in the time of Jesus. This was not a society where women, widows included, were entitled or allowed to appear in court. The irony of the story in its context is that the widow would have no rights and she certainly would not have access to a judge in a formal procedure of law. They could not testify in court. So, the widow crying out for justice in front of a judge is in fact a parody or an ironic fantasy. So, what was Luke thinking when he used her as a symbol of persistence? One plausible assumption is for the widow to have cried out to the judge unofficially. Perhaps she calls to him as he passes her on his way to the city gates to judge the disputes and charges of the men for the day. The cries of the woman eventually sway the cold heart of the judge, who gives in to her request. The message I hear from Jesus is this, “If hard-hearted judges can be moved to act, how much more will Abba-God be willing and eager always to help the children of God?” It is here that the widow becomes our teacher. The widow had no rights. She, in fact, did not have access to the judge, but that did not stop her from persistently asking for justice.

What are we to make of this parable? Who is really the widow here? Who is the judge? Some people interpret this parable to understand God as the judge and human beings as the persistent widow. But there is one major issue with this approach: God is not like the judge at

all. The unjust judge wears many disguises: prejudice, hatred, fear, the disease that won't be healed, economic systems, death, grief, addiction. But God's nature is just. God's way is to love and to give lavishly. God doesn't answer our prayers just to get rid of us. God desires to be in relationship with us and the whole of creation.

I wonder if the story is less about God, and more about us. I wonder if it's about the state of our hearts, that we are both the judge and the widow. Maybe what's at stake is not who God is and how God operates in the world but who we are, and why we need so desperately to be people of persistent prayer.

Another way of looking at the parable is to liken the judge who neither fears God nor respects anyone to the evil forces in this broken world that run counter to God's way of being. They could be the powerful who abuse their power, exploit the marginalized, and ignore the injustices and suffering around them. The widow is those who persistently oppose these forces and calling for justice. Prophets, protesters, preachers, teachers, advocates for justice - these are some of the widows whose persistent pestering will indeed wear down the will and the erected walls that are barriers to justice.

Act 2:

Widow: (Knocks on door) Mr. Judge, it's me again. The persistent widow. For the love of justice would you help me?

Judge: Oh, for Pete's sake, can you just stop bothering me once and for all? You know that I'm corrupt and don't fear God. Why do you keep pestering me? Let me ask you something, if I don't help you, will you go away?

Widow: I'm afraid I couldn't and I wouldn't back down. Never!

Judge: You know, you are the most persistent woman I have ever met. (Pause - sighs) All right, All right. I'll help you - not because of your situation, and certainly not because I'm a nice man because I am not. I will grant you justice because of your persistence that wears me out. Oh, by the way, will you stop banging on my door?

Widow: Mr. Judge, that is wonderful. My prayers are answered. God bless you, your honor. Thank you. I will be grateful forever.

The widow in Jesus' parable is the very picture of persistence. She knows her need, she knows its urgency, and she knows exactly where to go and whom to ask in order to get her need met. "Give me justice! I will not shut up until you do." Have you ever wondered what happens when we pray like the widow? When you persist in prayer — really persist, with a full heart - do you feel something different? Do you feel that your heart grows stronger? That your heart becomes less fragile that it even soars? But maybe there's another point to the parable: that the work of prayer is hard and costly. If the parable has anything to offer, it is that prayer alone will wear down our inner judge. It is through persistent prayer that our heart will soften. It is through persistent prayer that every obstacle we place before God — our fear, our shame, our woundedness, our inattentiveness — will be dismantled. In this sense, prayer is first and foremost for us. 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.

Here's what we need to remember. To pray does not mean giving God a to-do list and then sitting back expecting God to magically fix everything. To pray means that we offer our cry to God and then we do whatever we can to bring about the change we seek, trusting that God is also already doing what God needs to do. Maybe that means we feed the hungry. We offer compassion to the grieving. We speak and teach against hatred and prejudice, respecting the dignity of every human being. We strive for justice and peace. We make our case not just before God but with God. We join God in answering our prayer. Jesus taught his disciples not to lose heart but rather keep on praying, pestering, badgering, bothering. Luke says the story urges us not to lose heart. Faith would not be defined as ideology, but as Jesus described it, not losing heart. The heart to tackle impossible things. The heart to endure. To persist. Not letting discouragement overcome hope, not letting injustice overcome your belief that justice will prevail.

Friends, we are the widows of transforming the world! Starting today and in the next two weeks, we are embarking on an annual stewardship campaign. Are we ready to pledge our time, talents and treasures? Are we prepared to be co-creators and stewards of God? We do not know what the outcome of this campaign will be. We looked at the past years' results and we cannot

help but compare that those pre-pandemic years gave us better results. We do not know where this campaign will lead us, but I truly believe that if we persistently live and pray like the widow, the ministry of this congregation, our vision and mission statements, promise a new way of being in the community. To live the widow's faith may be some of the most difficult and necessary work we do. Do not lose heart. God does not ask us to do what we cannot do. God does not ask what we cannot give. God only asks us one thing. Live the persistent widow's faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

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