

19.10.20 - “Prayers of Persistence”

Luke 18:1-8, NRSV - Rev. Adam Hange

We don't often think about Jesus as being funny, and yet, today's parable might be some of his most comedic material. In this story, unique to the gospel of Luke, it's not hard to imagine Jesus teaching, with a crowd gathered around him, chuckling at this ridiculous reversal story.

A woman pounds and pounds on the door of a rotten and corrupt government official, who could care less about her problems, until finally, when he can't take the constant knocking, he sticks his head out and says, “*Alright, alright, already! Knock it off! I'll give you whatever you want if you just leave me alone!*”

The crowd laughs because, of course, they all know this woman. She's the picture of the person who always seems to have a black cloud hovering over her, ready to rain on her at any minute. She always gets a raw deal - because she has nothing - no husband/family, no money/security, no power/social standing - in that culture. They know her, and how pitiable she is.

They know this judge, too, the one who is only out for himself. He is no public servant, this one, so they guffaw at the idea of *one of their own*, this poor, powerless, pitiable woman, pestering and annoying this smarmy guy who everyone loves to hate, until, finally, finally, he does something good *in spite of himself*.

It's a story that's sorta perfect for sight comedy, right? You could see it playing equally well on the opera stage, or Sesame Street, with Oscar the Grouch playing the part of the smarmy official... As is often the case, you sort of lose the zing of the joke, in the translation from the original Greek to modern English.

Look at the answer in verse 5, “Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming” (verse 5). In the original Greek, though, the judge says: “because this widow causes trouble for me, I will give her justice, so that she may not, in the end, give me a black eye by her coming” (verse 5). The verb *hypopiazo*, translated “causes trouble for me” - literally means “to give a black eye,”

However, when English translations do not capture the meaning of this verb, they soften the tenacity of the widow's actions, as well as her perceived status as a “trouble-maker” to the system.¹

¹ Wilson, Brittany E. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4201, Accessed 10/17/2019

Now, I can't condone actual violence, but you can almost see the crowd chuckling at imagining this poor widow giving the unjust judge a black eye, and then him, going into the office the next day, and having to explain how he got it and who he got it from! You can imagine the crowd laugh, and then sigh... and then remember that even Jesus' jokes have a point. And they remember that this is what Jesus said prayer is like.²

Yes, this parable - this story that talks it's way around the topic to come back to the point - is told in the context of other parables on the theme of prayer... and holding on to our faith... and the long-awaited arrival of the realm of God on Earth. To understand this parable in context, it's helpful to begin, in fact, at the end with v. 8 - where it says, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" That is a much bigger question! Yet, that is the context in which Jesus tells this story. That is his point! Will we, like the widow, keep knocking on the door, keep pestering the powerful for justice, keep on, working, and praying, for God's justice and peace to rule and reign in this world?

But that's not often how this parable is interpreted today. Editors of our Bibles sometimes title it alternatively the "Unjust Judge" or the "Importunate" or "Persistent Widow." More often, we tend to simplify this story to the importance of continuing on in prayer. I argue it is about that, but not only about that. The meaning you derive from this parable depends on who you focus on in the story. In that way, it can become something of a choose-your-own-ending story.

If you go down the interpretive path of focusing on the unjust judge - you might come away with the idea that, with enough petition, even the most amoral person, has an incentive to answer the nagging pleas of the oppressed and powerless. So keep calling! Keep writing letters! Keep signing those petitions! If you go down the other path, and focus on the widow - a symbolic "stand-in" for one of several historically marginalized groups in the Judeo-Christian tradition - children, immigrants, poor, sick, any "other" - than the take away is quite different. Then the takeaway seems to be that we need to persistent in prayer. That it's our job to keep coming to *God* with our prayers, until they are answered, because God is infinitely more willing and able to answer, than the reluctant and unjust official in the story. You might even see this story as a call to *persistence in resistance* towards injustice. You might see in this story, an exhortation to, metaphorically-speaking, give the unjust judges of our day, a "black eye."

To pester, embarrass, pressure, and demand, that they make whatever is wrong - right. If you read the back of your bulletin today you'll read such an exhortation to continue on persistently in the work for justice - through many, many different ways. I'll tell you, this is

² Long, Kimberly-Bracken, *Feasting on the Word Commentary*, Year C Volume 4, John Knox Press, p. 188.

something some in our tradition know how to do well in our faith tradition. We know how to organize petitions, call our elected officials, organize rallies and vigils. And all that get, tiring. *And* we grow weary. And we sometimes wonder if we are making any difference at all. The truth is there are many, many who wait patiently for justice, healing, and help. Many who wait patiently.

Our Immigrant Justice Team has been a part of monthly vigils at our Washington County courthouse for the last 2 years. Sometimes it feels like what we are doing really matters. Sometimes it feels like it doesn't make much of a difference at all. Like we are doing our part to pester and pressure, with no effect. At times like these, I think we would do well to look, not to the immediate results of every small action or effort for change, to paraphrase, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, look for the "long arc of history bending toward justice."

It's the same with some of our personal prayers. When I pray for those experiencing houselessness, sometimes it feels like an overwhelming challenge, with no answer. Sometimes it feels like, for all our efforts, nothing is improving, nothing is changing. We need to remind ourselves of the power of persistence. We've seen and heard a lot of stories about persistent women, especially, lately. This past Friday, first all-female spacewalk. Last month, we saw Greta Thunberg, who persistently held a school strike. Just this week, images of powerful women, by themselves, literally, standing up to the most powerful.

I also hear a lot of stories of deeply faithful, prayerful people, who have persisted through great trials. Health challenges. Mental illness. Joblessness. Difficulties in their relationships... crisis of faith. They have prayed persistently, and their prayers aren't always answered.

Steve Martin once starred in a movie called "Leap of Faith" where he played the role of this faith healer who rolls into a small town, hoping to clean up, and there's this boy who can't walk - who asks to be healed, believes this preacher can heal him, and prays, and prays, and prays... and isn't healed. And it devastates him. Have you ever been in a place like that? Wondered, God, if you're so just, if you're so powerful, if you're so loving? Why don't you answer my prayers?

What hope does Jesus offer? He says, "God is nothing like the unjust judge in this story." God promises even speedier relief. God promises to be attentive to our cries. One of my favorite scriptures is Galatians 6:9 - "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."

I don't know what you are waiting for this morning, what you've been nagging God for in prayer... I don't know what weariness you are feeling in your own struggle, but God knows.

God sees you. On a recent visit to Seaside, I saw this street sign that, at first, I thought was for some road race. You know, sometimes people put up signs like “You can do it!” along the course of a marathon or something... But no, it was just an encouragement. It said, “Don’t give up.”

That is my prayer, for you, friends. Don’t give up. Tell others, “Don’t give up.” For God tells us, “Don’t give up.” Amen.