

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:27-34

²⁷The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. ²⁹In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." ³⁰But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. ³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD.

“Persistent Prayer”

You know, the “Time with Young Christians” is a favorite part of so many church’s worship services and provides not only education but a lot of fun for children, congregations and pastors. But they’re not always easy to do...to come up with each week, engaging ways to teach some of the lessons of scripture, for such a wide range of ages and interests. For instance, a number of years ago, I had the idea of using a medical book to teach children about the complexities of Jesus’ parable. The book was a children’s book wherein every new turn of a cardboard page overlaid what it was displaying onto the page before. On each page there was detailed a different human organ system! So, for example, a picture of the human musculoskeletal system was overlaid with a page turn by the neurologic system, which was overlaid with the next page turn by the cardiovascular system and then the gastrointestinal system and so forth until finally the entire human body was there to be appreciated in all its many layers of transparent complexity. For a person like me, who loves the medical sciences, I thought this to be great! But unfortunately, the children had different opinions. “Ooooo...Yuk. Gross, that’s so gross,!” they hollered out. One clutched her throat as though she was going to be sick. So, well...I decided that idea was a bust. I put the book on my shelf and figured I’d give it to Alex someday...maybe when he’s 30 or something. Nevertheless, I still think the book demonstrates well of how Jesus’ parables have many layers of meanings and lessons. And that’s what we’ll see with today’s text.

Luke writes that Jesus told his disciples a parable about a fiercely determined widow who persevered. She was in a bad way...living in poverty, without influence, resources and suffering significant injustice. She put her case before a judge, only this judge was a horrible one. He was without an inner moral compass, and was generally apathetic toward God and humanity. He couldn’t be bothered by this widow. Likely even very strong men dreaded appearing in his court, and lawyers treaded softly as they approached his bench. However, the widow persisted with her request...she persevered even beyond being a pest. The judge characterized her actions as those of a boxer. In the original Greek, the translation of the

judge's comments are, "*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.*"¹

I think before we look at a first perspective, the first layer of meaning, of this parable, it is important to remember who the original listeners to the parable were...Jesus' disciples, of course, but also Luke's audience in 60-70AD, Gentile converts from the Greek cities where Paul had worked. These people had experienced persecution and hardship, and they'd prayed for many things which they did not always receive...safety, protection, comfort and relief. Sound familiar? Sure. In their world, they were weary, as weary as we often are praying over a sick child or dying parent, over a lab test that has come back positive, over a loved one who never gets the job, over another eviction, another assault, a shooting or bombing. They, like us, knew the sting of seemingly unanswered prayer, fervent prayer, and they were losing heart.

And the parable, which should NOT be interpreted as a direct allegory but a lesson in contrasts, addressed their loss of heart. It set the widow up as an example for them, not as one who would pester God like an annoying mosquito, nor one whose goal would be to wear God down to a nub in order to get what she wanted. No, she was an example of a vulnerable person who displayed persistent hope, one who did not lose heart. With her as their example, they were being told that they could find in themselves her "purposefulness, precision, aliveness and clarity".² They could discover that they had the energy to each day likewise "head over to the judge's place in prayer to talk his ear off until he acknowledged the urgency of their needs."³

Have you ever prayed like the widow in this parable did? If so, what happened to you? What happened when you really poured out your heart with such tenacity and purpose? The Reformed theologian and pastor, RC. Sproul once said, "*persistent prayer does change things, all kinds of things. But the most important thing that it changes is us.*"⁴ Yes, when we pray persistently, we are changed. Our hearts grow stronger. We become less fragile and flighty, wiser, deeper and more centered in who we are, and as Debbie Thomas says, "*on occasion,*

¹ Brittany E. Wilson, "Commentary on Luke 18:1-8" http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4201 (accessed 10/18/19).

² Debbie Thomas. "10th Sunday after Pentecost". <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Debie-Thomas-19th-Sunday-after-Pentecost-10-16-2022.pdf>. (accessed 10-14-22).

³ Debbie Thomas.

⁴ RC Sproul. <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/6606279-the-prayer-of-the-lord#:~:text=%E2%80%9CPrayer%20does%20change...> (accessed 10-15-2022)

good and substantive things happen even when we don't receive the answer we're praying for."⁵

Of course, this is not to say that persistent prayer is not hard, that it does not baffle and try us. When prayer seems unanswered for weeks, months, years, when our tears fall unnoticed, and our cries fall on deaf ears, IT is tough. Certainly, it was for the widow. She had to make the decision each day to get up and ask once again, to risk humiliation again, to dare to believe that her request was worthy of articulation once again, to reach down into herself to find even more patience and trust, and to renew her focus on that promise that God has made to us all and Jesus has proven, (i.e.that evil WILL NOT have the last word, that life wins over death and God's kingdom WILL be established on earth, with those waters of justice just rolling, rolling down)!

Brothers and sisters, in this parable Jesus asks, "*Will I find faith on the earth (when I come again)?*," which is to say, "*will I find believers with such tenacity, such ferocity, such stubborn grit? Will I find ones who wield their God-given power?* Yes, power...the power of being able to be tenacious in prayer, to show up again and again, to dare wrestle with the ONE we know can be shaken and turned. Ultimately, the power of prayer is being able to approach his throne proving we have "skin in the game, approaching with Christian hope."⁶ When Jesus asks, "*Will I find faith on earth*" he is reminding us that his return is on the divine timetable, and that we, like the widow, might need wait...but not quietly.

And this, brothers and sisters, brings us to another way to read this parable, another meaning which can be laid over this one, like the turn of the page of that children's medical book. What if we switch roles? What if, as Bible scholars hypothesize, we do not assume that we are in the place of the widow and that the judge is the example of what God is not? What if we sit in the seat of the unjust judge and God takes on the persistent cries of the widow? What then, what do we hear? Well, we hear God's cry, for US to soften our hearts and attend to the pain, injustice, and sorrow in the world with compassion. "*I am coming to you on behalf of the vulnerable, the outcast, the oppressed, the suffering. And I am not going to leave you alone until you listen to*

⁵ Debbie Thomas.

⁶ Debbie Thomas.

me. I am going to come again and again and again until you act in response to what you hear, until you, as disciples and as the Church, repent of all the myriad of ways you continue to ignore all their cries and dismiss them. I demand that you respond with compassion with justice and mercy!”⁷

Friends, I think this perspective on the parable is valid. Parables are meant to be disruptive and provoking, and this perspective provokes and disrupts me. It rings true. I don’t know about you, but I know I so often say, *“It’s not my problem. Someone else will take care of it?, No, not yet!”*. And I know that God stubbornly keeps challenging me to let God’s priorities of compassion and justice reorder mine.⁸ Is this not the case with s all? God prods us to respond to the cries we hear in the messy and broken world around us, not just the ones of the people we understand and look like, but particularly the ones we don’t, particularly those who are the vulnerable, the outcast, the invisible, the oppressed. As Shannon Kershner says, *“God loves us just as we are, but God loves us too much to let us stay just as we are. So, God will keep pressing us, like that widow, God will not give up on us.”⁹*

So, it seems that after hearing this parable, from two different perspectives, we have a decision to make, brothers and sisters. Each of us needs to decide if we will listen, really listen to identify what God is persistently calling us to do, what God is bringing again and again to our minds and hearts, or NOT. Will we respond? Will we act? Mother Teresa’s famous quote on prayer: *“I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to pray for God change things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.”¹⁰* Yes, we have a decision to make, you and I. Will we listen to be changed to act or not? If we don’t, I assure you, we will not rest well, for our God is tenacious and stubborn and will continue to bother us. God is as tenacious and stubborn with us as God wants us to be with our God-given power of prayer, showing up at the foot of his throne, again and

⁷ Shannon Kirshner. *“The Persistent God”* In: Gordon C. Steward. *“A Standing Applase Sermon”*. <https://gordoncstewart.com/tag/shannon-kershner/> (accessed 10-15-2022).

⁸ Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol IX, p 229; In: Shannon Kirshner...

⁹ Shannon Kirshner

¹⁰ Mother Teresa: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/719941-i-used-to-pray-that-god-would-feed-the-hungry#:~:text=I%20used%...> (accessed 10-15-22).

again to be made stronger, wiser, deeper in the process, over and over wrestling with the One who we KNOW will grant justice to those who cry out and...AND...AND.. in the end WILL, WE MUST ALL PRAY WILL THEN COME AGAIN TO FIND FAITH ON EARTH. May it be so. Amen.