

“Persist” GPPC 10-20-19  
Jeremiah 31:27-34, Luke 18:1-8

So Jesus told a parable. Many of you have studied parables before, and you're aware that they are not cute little children's stories or unsophisticated grown-up stories either. Here is a well-known definition of a parable. “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” (Thomas G. Long quoting C.H. Dodd in *Preaching the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 92.)

So parables are meant to get us thinking and puzzling. Like sermons themselves, parables are designed to sneak up on us with God's truth. As Emily Dickinson put it, “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant.”

Luke goes a step further and tells us *why* Jesus told this particular parable to his disciples. He says Jesus told it because of “their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”

Jesus told his followers “to pray always.” They were to be in communication with God always, taking time to speak to God and

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taking time to listen to God. Praying not for luxuries or special privileges but for the needs of the world, their own daily needs, for their own faithfulness to God, and for God's will to be done.

So how are you and I doing with our prayers? Do we set aside a few minutes of quiet time to pray daily (and not just when we're driving our car)? Do we have good resources, scripture and devotional guides, we use in our prayer time? If not, I would be happy to make some suggestions.

And how are we doing with not losing heart? The Greek means "to lose one's motivation in continuing a desirable pattern of conduct...lose enthusiasm, be discouraged...to be afraid in the face of great difficulty." Are we tempted to lose heart?

Apparently, followers of Jesus back then were struggling with the possibility of losing heart. And who could blame them? After all, they were just a little band of people, seemingly just a bunch of nobodies living under the shadow of the mighty Roman Empire. What difference did their lives make? And maybe as we see what is happening in the

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world, or happening in our own lives, or in the lives of people we love, we sometimes struggle ourselves, struggle not to lose heart.

So Jesus told a parable meant to get his followers back then and his followers today thinking, puzzling, and living more faithfully.

He said there was a judge in an unnamed city, and this judge did not fear God or have respect for people either. And you may remember Jesus said that the two great commandments were to love God and to love our neighbor. But this judge did not care about either of those commandments. He was crooked.

But there was this widow in the same city, and she kept coming to the crooked judge demanding justice for herself against an unnamed opponent. That Jesus mentioned this woman was a widow tells us a lot. As one professor says there are “constant injunctions in [the Bible] to “do justice to the widow and to protect her, as well as the orphan, the poor, and the alien. The reason for such injunctions was that widows normally had no one to speak for them or to protect them...in most cases a woman needed a man to speak for her and to claim her rights. Since a widow usually does not have such a man, it is the responsibility of the

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entire people of God to care for her, and to make certain that justice is done.” (Justo L. González, *Luke in Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, 210.)

So whenever we read about widows, orphans, the poor, aliens, immigrants, vulnerable people in the Bible, we should perk up our ears. These people represent a responsibility for the *entire* people of God to care for them and to make sure that justice is done. This is what Holy Scripture teaches us over and over and over.

Well, the widow in Jesus’ story was interesting. Instead of waiting for somebody else to speak up for her (when nobody probably would), she spoke up for herself. Repeatedly! She just kept coming to bug the crooked judge. In fact, she bugged him so much that we hear the judge’s inner thoughts and they are fascinating. He thought, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anybody, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

Notice the crooked judge’s attitude did *not* change; he still did not care what God or people thought. This is not a story that ends with a dazzling sunrise, churning violins, and a crooked judge who finally sees

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the error of his ways, repents, and becomes a judicial hero. No. Instead, the crooked judge changed his behavior and gave the widow justice simply to avoid having her wear him out. The Greek can actually be translated more literally, “so that she might not finally come and blacken my eye.” A bit of hyperbole.

The crooked judge finally granted justice in order to avoid the humiliation of a black eye. The crooked judge finally granted justice because this widow persisted and the judge didn't feel like being browbeaten.

Can you imagine such a thing? Can you think of modern-day people like this widow?

I see sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg from Sweden traveling around the world demanding that the world leaders stop their stonewalling and act immediately to address climate change. Standing before the U.N. Climate Action Summit she said to them, "This is all wrong. I shouldn't be standing here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to me for hope? *How dare you!* You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty

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words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

How dare you, indeed. And aren't we hoping, as a church, to nurture our children in the Christian faith to be just as wonderfully irritating about God's creation and justice as Greta is?

I've told you that the widow in the story represents widows, orphans, the poor, aliens, immigrants, all vulnerable people. Jesus has a special place in his heart for these people. So the church has a special place in its heart and a responsibility for them too. And when we see these vulnerable people marching for equal rights or hollering at elected representatives or disrupting meetings, we might better pay attention. Jesus has a special place in his heart for them and the church has a special place in its heart for them and a special responsibility for them. We might do well to pay attention and join their cause.

But the words of Jesus here did not end with the crooked judge caving in under pressure from the widow, as satisfying as that was.

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Instead, Jesus ended the parable, but returned to speaking to the community of faith. He said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. Yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

In other words, Jesus said, “This parable is not just about widows, orphans, the poor, and vulnerable people. This parable is about *you*, my followers.” As one Bible scholar puts it, “...The widow represents God’s chosen ones, the community of believers.” (François Bovon, *Luke 2* in *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, 531.)

So Jesus was saying, “For heaven’s sake, this crooked judge was finally worn down by a persistent widow. Well, God is a zillion times better than a crooked judge. Won’t God quickly grant justice to his chosen ones (you) when you cry out day and night? Of course God will. God will grant justice quickly. But will you keep the faith until the end? Will you keep the faith? That’s the question.”

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Jesus is such a meddler. Because that is our question too. Yes, we know that often God does not seem to “quickly grant justice” to us. We try to do the right things, and speak the truth in love, and speak truth to power, and, dear God, justice does not seem to come quickly. And as the early Christians also discovered, vindication does not seem to come quickly either.

A preaching professor said, “In a large gathering of persons concerned about certain unfair and oppressive conditions in our society, an elderly black minister read this parable and gave a one-sentence interpretation: [he said] ‘Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.’” (Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentary Series, 210.)

And now we have come full circle, haven't we? So how do we keep the faith when justice does not seem to come quickly, when vindication does not seem to come quickly? How do we keep the faith?

As Jesus said, we must “pray always and not to lose heart.” We must be a people of constant private prayer and public prayer. A people who set aside our excuses and gather together for worship, study, and

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prayer. A people who come together to pray and engage in mission and justice. A people who support and encourage each other to keep speaking, acting, and trusting, because we know in the end God's love in Christ is victorious. So like that widow, we must persist, even when it is hard. "And will not God grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry to God day and night?...I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

And we answer. Yes! Through Christ our Lord. Amen. ©Jeff

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