

Luke 18: 1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." ' And the Lord 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. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

#### SERMON

Once there was a woman who would not give up. As our Gospel reading this week describes her, the woman is a widow who is desperate for justice against an oppressor. Day after day, she appeals to a judge, a man "who neither fears God nor has respect for people." Day after day, the judge refuses to help. But she persists, tirelessly bothering the judge until he grows sick of her very presence: "I will grant her justice," he says to himself, "so that she may not wear me out."

At the outset, the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus's parable is about "the need to pray always and not lose heart."

I suspect that statement refers to what happened just before this reading, where Jesus names the suffering and pain yet to come, and also reminds the disciples "God's Kingdom is already among you".

This parable can feel troubling - are we to wear God down with our prayers? What about the reality that most of the time our prayers seem to go unanswered?

When we get caught up in these questions, preachers and teachers Barbara Lundblad and Debie Thomas<sup>1</sup> suggest we're asking the wrong questions.

The question is not if God is hearing us or if God will eventually be worn down.

The question is, will we still be doing the work of justice when we are needed?

So...is it a parable about prayer, justice or faith?

Yes. Yes, says Dr. Lundblad<sup>2</sup>.

*If we pray without working for justice our prayers are empty*

*If we work for justice without prayer we will think it all depends on us*

*If we pray and work for justice without faith, we will fall to despair when justice isn't done.*

Perhaps this story is less about God, and more about us, they suggest.

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.

The parable begins with an exhortation not to lose heart.

What does it look like to "lose heart" in our spiritual lives?

The words that come to mind are weariness and burnout.

When I 'lose heart' I sometimes get irritable and overwhelmed and want to check out.

I lose my sense of focus and direction. I want to go into my house, shut out the world, and get lost in distraction.

Here we have this persistent widow - doggedly pursuing justice, not losing heart.

What can we learn from this woman?

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<sup>1</sup> [Debie Thomas' sermon](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Pulpit Fiction](#) 10/16/22

The widow in Jesus' parable knows her need and she knows exactly where to go and whom to ask in order to get her need met.

Like many of the widows in the Bible - the widow of Zarephath, who feeds the prophet Elijah; Anna, the prophetess who awaits the infant Messiah; the generous widow whose "mite" Jesus commends - this bold, plucky woman shows no signs of burnout, as she demands. "Give me justice! I will not stop until you do."

Can we call what the widow is doing an act of prayer? Jesus seems to link her pursuit of justice to prayer.

What happens when we pray like the widow? Persistently, fiercely?

This raises a much deeper question: Just what is prayer for?

While I grew up saying prayers all my life, I really learned about prayer when my mom was diagnosed with cancer. I was 21, just about to start my senior year in college. Her journey with illness rocked my spiritual world. I prayed, called out to God for help, day in and day out, morning and night. Prayer was suddenly so much more than the rote prayers we recited at the dinner table or before bed. They became real, intimate. Not necessarily answered in the ways I wanted, yet I persisted.

I know that when I persist in prayer — really persist, with a full heart, over a long period of time — something happens to me.

My sense of who I am, to whom I belong, what really matters in this life — these things change. I change.

My perspective and relationship to the Divine changes, even when I don't receive the answer I'm praying for.

I don't mean for a moment to suggest that unanswered prayer doesn't take a toll. It does. It hurts and it baffles.

Prayer is a great mystery. We can't know — why some prayers are answered and many others are not. We can't understand why our earnest pleas for justice or healing hit the wall of God's silence.

But maybe that's the point of the parable, too: the work of prayer is hard. The widow's predicament is not straightforward; she has to make a costly choice every single day.

Can I be persistent?

Am I still capable of trusting in the possibility of justice?

From the heart of this bewildering intersection of prayer and justice, Jesus asks, "Will I find faith on the earth?"

Which is to say, will I find human beings like the bothersome widow?

Will I find such ferocity? Such tenacity? Such stick-with-it-ness?

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 - perhaps, prayer is not to be taken lightly.

We can't know what gets shaken, transformed or upended simply because we show up again and again in prayer.

So... is it a parable about prayer, justice or faith?

This parable is about our faithfulness to persevere. To keep showing up - with our prayers, with our hands and feet, our voices, our votes, in the work of making manifest God's kingdom, here and now.

It is about seeing God's justice being enacted all around, even if it is not yet fulfilled.

We are to be the widow maintaining the voice of the prophet - not to God, but to the unjust rulers of the day.

Jesus asks that tough question at the end. Will he find faith on earth?

Will he find the faithful?

Will we still be doing the work of justice when we are needed?

Have we been persistent?

Are we just waiting for God to do the work, or are we being dogged in our pursuit of justice?

On October 24, Penn State student group Uncensored America will host Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes and comedian Alex Stein<sup>3</sup>. The event is titled "Stand Back and Stand By" — emphasizing the Proud Boys' ties to hate speech, violence and white nationalism.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/12/1128448747/proud-boys-founder-penn-state-speaker-protest>

That evening there will be alternative events on campus as well, celebrating unity and propaganda awareness. Local leader and activist, Terry Watson, suggests we focus on the question 'what does love speech sound like, look like?'

Just a few weeks ago State College police<sup>4</sup> put out a call for help in trying to identify who has been posting extremist stickers around our community. Stickers inviting people to join hate groups.

Southern Poverty Law Center reports that the best way to keep hate out of a community is to *Do something. In the face of hatred, apathy is interpreted as acceptance by the perpetrators.*<sup>5</sup>

Be persistent. Do not let apathy win the day.

What does love speech look like? Like the persistent widow showing up again and again?

What does persistence, living out love speech in our actions, look like?

Not apathy; not burnout; not despair.

What does it look like for us to live in the intersection of faith, justice and prayer?

So many ways to be faithful participants in the bringing of the kingdom...

Right here at UMC, we are at a subtle, but important time - what does it mean to be the church today? How do we choose to spend our resources of money and time, as individuals and as a body of believers?

I see it -

one way I see it here in our congregation is in the countless hours of work several of you have put in the past 8 months, preparing for, welcoming and supporting an Afghan family who continues to make the State College community their home. And many of you have financially supported this work. This group is now at a time of discernment - holding in prayer what next steps might look like.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.centredaily.com/news/local/community/state-college/article266224391.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/20170814/ten-ways-fight-hate-community-response-guide>

What does it mean to be prayerful? To be faithful? To be persistent in the work of justice?  
Prayer, justice, faith. Our scripture shows us how intertwined and inseparable they are.

*If we pray without working for justice our prayers are empty*

*If we work for justice without prayer we will think it all depends on us*

*If we pray and work for justice without faith, we will fall to despair when justice isn't done.*

The good news is that it's not just up to us - this work is ours, but we don't do it alone. In the song we're about to hear are the words:

*The Spirit of God is here in this place*

*The Spirit of God moves here in this place*

*She's here to console*

*She's here to liberate*

*She's here to guide*

*The Spirit of God is here*

May the Spirit of God move us, touch us, lead us in this work of faith, justice and prayer.