

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 16, 2022
Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 119:97-104
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

Holy Persistence

A widow and a judge. In some city. There aren't a lot of particulars in this parable that Jesus tells. Just a widow intent on getting the legal decision she wants and a judge who refuses to give it to her.

This parable comes to us with a fair amount of baggage, as most of Jesus' parables do. For 2,000 years, particular takes on and interpretations of it have colored how we now hear it and understand it.

This process started early on. The writer of Luke has placed a kind of narrative frame around the story that has influenced the interpretation of this parable through the centuries.

For example, most often this story is called the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge. It's Luke's interpretive frame at the end of the story where an explanation of the parable is placed on the lips of Jesus that gives us the adjective *unjust* to describe the judge. The core verses of the story, the part most plausibly spoken by Jesus, use no adjectives for either the widow or the judge.

My frequent companion in exploring Jesus' parables is New Testament scholar and professor Amy-Jill Levine. Dr Levine says of this parable and the widow in particular, "The widow might well be destitute, oppressed, and desperate. She may also be wealthy, powerful, and vengeful. Or she may be somewhere in between. Once we stereotype her, we can ignore the challenge of the parable, and so ignore the challenge to our stereotypes." (Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, HarperCollins, 2014, p 250.)

I would add, we shouldn't stereotype the judge either. Professor Levine reminds us that Luke's gospel and its companion volume the Acts of the Apostles both take a dim view of judges in general, seeing them as harsh and to be avoided. The judge in this parable seems no different.

We don't know if the widow is righteous, only that she is persistent. Same for the judge: we don't know much about him really. And if he is unjust, what makes him so? Is it the fact that repeatedly he won't grant the widow her request or the fact

that he ultimately does?

The fact that he neither fears God nor respects people doesn't necessarily mean he is corrupt although he may well be a curmudgeon. The part about how he doesn't respect people means, literally, he is no a respecter of persons. He doesn't treat people who have higher status than he does as though they are better than he is. And he doesn't treat people of lower status as though they are worse than he is. He doesn't care about status. When you think about it, this is a good quality to have in a judge who is asked to be impartial and deal with the facts of a case, isn't it?

So, what is this story really about? Let's start at the beginning, where we began a few moments ago with the reading of this gospel: Luke 18:1: *Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*

As with all of Jesus' parables, we can safely say this: it is not an allegory or a fable. The widow is not a stand-in for someone or something else, nor is the judge.

This story is about persistence.

The widow's persistence eventually wears the judge down. It's not the justness of her case or her cause that produces the result she desires. Indeed, the sense of the Greek is she may seeking vengeance not justice. And scripture teaches us both that vengeance belongs to God not to us and that justice without mercy veers toward vengeance. It's not about the justness of her cause.

It's about how persistence pays off. The point of the parable today is much the same as Jesus' teachings in Matthew, Mark, and Luke about seeking, asking, knocking. Keep on seeking, keep on asking, keep on knocking: present continuous, never just one and done.

The point of today's parable is pretty much identical to the teaching in Luke 11 we heard on July 24, about the friend at midnight pounding on the door asking to borrow bread because unexpected guests have arrived and caught the friend without groceries to feed the guests. *Open up, and give me three loaves.* The reply comes, *Dude, it's late; we're all in bed; we're locked down tight for the night.* But as the friend continues to knock on the door, to keep on knocking, eventually the householder gets up and gives the bread not because of their friendship (which may not exist any longer at this point); not because of real need; but because of persistence. Anything to make the knocking on the door in the middle of the night stop.

The friend at midnight parable follows immediately Jesus' giving to his disciples the Lord's prayer. The disciples find Jesus praying in a place by himself; and when

he finishes, they ask him to teach them how they should pray as John taught his disciples to pray. He teaches them to pray, saying, “[Our] Father, [who art in heaven], hallowed be thy name....” You know it by heart. It’s one of the first things many of us commit to memory. And it’s one of the last things even people with the most incapacitating dementia remember longest.

Jesus tells them how to pray as in what words to pray and then tells them how to pray as in what manner. In what manner should we pray? Persistently.

Next Sunday we’ll talk more about the importance of our attitudes in prayer. Today though, with this second teaching in Luke on the need for persistence in prayer, let’s dig a little further into persistence, what it is and what it isn’t.

Persistence has to do with consistency and constancy, with showing up regularly. It’s about discipline and faithfulness and reliability.

It’s the close cousin if not the child or the parent of perseverance for which we have prayed in today’s collect: that Christ’s church would persevere in faith.

Persistence is not outright stubbornness, and it surely isn’t obstinacy.

Persistence has to do with a kind of tenacity, of hanging in there.

It is not, however, insisting on having our way no matter what.

We can’t pray as Jesus taught us, saying to God, “Your kingdom come, your will be done” and then insist on our own way even if it is misguided, short-sighted, or otherwise out of whack.

Prayer is not convincing God to do what we want. It’s something else.

Jesus invites us to something different. We can be persistent in praying in the way Jesus taught us, both in the words of the Lord’s prayer and in what he taught us by example in his own habit of regularly spending time alone with God in prayer to recenter, recharge, and reconnect, remember.

If we show up regularly to connect with God, without an agenda and with a willingness to be guided, prayer will work in us and on us. And, subsequently, God will work through us. Rather than pushing our own ideas through and persuading God that we are right, prayer invites us to be persistent, regular in centering down and remember who God is and who we are.

How should we pray? Persistently. That is, consistently, regularly. In what form or with what words?

Author Ann Lamott suggests that there are really only three prayers: Thanks! Help! Wow!

God knows our hearts. God knows us inside and out; all desires known, no secrets. So, many times one of those three one-word prayers may be enough.

If you'd like a little more structure, the Lord's prayer is hard to beat. It acknowledges God as holy and sovereign. It asks that God's reign come in full and God's will be done on earth as in heaven. It asks for provision for the day. It asks for forgiveness to be granted to us in the same measure we grant it to others. It asks for preservation in the midst of difficulties. It concludes with a blessing of praise, a benediction.

You can also try the daily office in the Book of Common Prayer. It's four-fold: morning prayer, noonday prayer, evening prayer, compline: prayers at the end of day. Or even just one or two of those. If you want to pray with others every day not just on Sunday, you could join us on Wednesday mornings at 10 AM in the Lady Chapel if you're here in person. And whether you're here in person or streaming this service, you can join morning and evening prayer on Facebook Live every Monday through Friday at 7:30 AM and 5:30 PM. Bruce, Lisa, Samantha, Judy, Mary Carlin, and Mary and occasionally Tim will meet you there: 7:30 AM, 5:30 PM. Talk about persistence in prayer! These dedicated and amazing lay people have been leading this prayer ministry morning and evening, Monday through Friday, without a miss for going on three years. Persistence in prayer.

Our prayer book is full of wonderful prayers. In a certain sense, they are the distillations of millions of prayers offered by millions of people over millennia. They remind us we are part of the communion of saints. If you're not familiar, I invite you to check out the section of the prayer book that begins on page 810 with many prayers for different occasions and circumstances. If you need to pray and don't know what to say, chances are, someone before you has been in a very similar circumstance, and there's a prayer held for you in the pages of that dear book.

Yesterday, via livestream, Becky and I participated in the burial office for someone dear to us, our first rector, the Reverend William McCord Thigpen, III. He was just Mac to us. He welcomed us into the Episcopal Church many years ago at St Bartholomew's, Atlanta. And yesterday at St Bartholomew's in person and via livestream from Key West to Opossum Bay, Tasmania, Australia and lots of places

in between, hundreds of people joined our hearts and our tears and our joys in prayer in the beautiful and perfect words of the burial office. These prayers do the work of grief, that is, they help us mourn when we need to mourn. And in addition to the mourning of the burial office, it reminds us of joy; it is an Easter liturgy. It brings us balance, steadiness, companionship, persistence in walking the way Jesus has set before us.

Sometimes if you feel the need to pray and feel you don't have the words and feel you can't even bear to look in the prayer book for somebody else's words passed down to you, don't worry. As Romans tells us, the Spirit intercedes for us in our weakness and perplexity with groanings too deep for words. Words aren't necessary for prayer to work. Words aren't necessary for prayer.

And yet, for us humans, language both expresses and creates reality for us. And sometimes the right words are a great comfort.

I close today with a prayer that has been a companion of mine for several decades now. A printed copy of it hangs framed in my office right next to the door. It comes from Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and prolific author who lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Nelson County, Kentucky. It's found in his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*.

Let us pray.

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”