



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 19 – Proper 24 Year C**

#### **The Persistent Widow**

**[RCL]: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8**

Any of us might have had an experience like the persistent widow in the Gospel reading from Luke. If you have ever had to deal with an insurance company or a government agency, like the DMV, or in some cases even a child's school or a hospital or the justice system, you might know how it feels to wonder if anyone is listening or responding to your needs.

We all experience the micro-aggressions of bureaucracy, but sometimes our needs are serious and the experience of feeling unheard in the middle of an emotional or desperate situation can be devastating. We can feel like Sisyphus in the famous myth: struggling to lift a heavy weight up a tall mountain, and just when we think we've reached the top, it rolls all the way back down and we're forced to start at the beginning again. More often than not, it is our persistence, our unwillingness to let things slide by, our unwillingness to lose hope, that eventually leads to success.

It isn't always comfortable to keep advocating for what we need, and of course, it would be much easier if everyone with the authority or capability to do so would help, but at the end of the day, our constant reminders, our relentlessness, make a big difference in getting the job done. Like the persistent widow in the Gospel, if we keep making our case, we may eventually get a response—even if only because the people in charge are so annoyed that they just want to get us off their backs.

History is full of people whose success can be directly attributed to their persistence. Tradition claims that Colonel Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken tried to sell his chicken recipe 1,007 times before it was eventually picked up. More heroic figures like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela sought justice and social change through careful, thoughtful, bold persistence. If any of these figures had gotten tired or burnt out and had given up—which likely crossed their minds from time to time—the world would be a very different place. The pursuit of justice requires perseverance; the ability of individuals and communities to persist in seeking justice can change the world.

In the parable, the widow eventually gets what she wants even from this judge who, in his own words, had “no fear of God and no respect for anyone” (Luke 18:1-8, NRSV). To be a widow in the ancient Near East was to be among the most vulnerable of society. As a widow, this woman would have had no advocate, no

social standing upon which to plead her case. She was helpless in the deepest sense of the term. All she had was her will to persist; to not give up; to demand that someone listen to her. Sometimes, when we are most vulnerable—when we have the least to lose—we are also most likely to be bold. Despite the widow’s marginalized status in society, she exhibited great strength.

When have we felt vulnerable? When have we noticed things in our lives or in the world around us that need to change? How have we found strength in a moment of desperation or great need? In what ways do we notice society beginning to respond to the cries or persistence of those who are bold enough to seek justice?

The unrighteous judge eventually does what is right, but only because this nagging woman has made him feel trapped. He does not respond out of a changed heart. Very often social change is like this, too. The Emancipation Proclamation did not immediately end slavery, nor did it heal centuries of racial division and violence. The Voting Rights Act promised equity, but it didn’t change the hearts and minds of all American citizens. The end of colonialism or apartheid was just the first step in finding true independence and equality. Achieving justice is sometimes easier than changing the heart of a society. There is hope in getting justice, but there’s always more work to do. We don’t know what kind of justice the widow in this parable sought, but we can imagine that whatever social circumstances led her to be treated unfairly did not immediately disappear at the judge’s ruling.

The Gospel assures us that God is not like the unrighteous judge. God does not respond to our needs only when we have pestered so much that it would be easier to just give in. The Gospel says that God will vindicate us – or bring us justice – “quickly” (Luke 18:8). So, how does God bring justice? How does God respond to our prayers? God did not settle a court case for this woman. God did not end slavery in the United States or pass legislation to protect the civil rights of all people; God did not end colonialism in India or Apartheid in South Africa.

That’s our work. It’s our job to persist, to advocate for ourselves when we feel helpless; to advocate for others when they are the most vulnerable. God’s justice is much more comprehensive than what can be achieved through legislation or courts. The Gospel promises us that God will respond to our prayers much faster than the unjust systems of society. If even an unrighteous judge can be merciful in the face of a persistent woman, then how much more merciful is God who loves us and created us and knows every inch of our being?

The promises of God in scripture are hard to grapple with. When societal justice comes so slowly and is often so limited, how can we believe that God is at work, providing us with unbounded love, mercy, and speedy vindication? Where do we see that? God’s vindication is not necessarily courtroom justice or even societal change, though God is with us in those struggles. We believe in a God who came to be with us and suffered alongside humanity. Jesus himself experienced injustice at the hands of a government that neither feared God nor regarded man. We believe in a God who is always at work, changing hearts and minds, transforming lives, bringing dead things to life, turning the normal systems and power structures on their

head—making the weak strong and the vulnerable powerful and giving resounding voice to those who have been ignored for too long.

God is in the cries of the helpless. Imagine the widow in the parable going to the judge again and again to plead her case. The judge ignored her, but God was with her the whole time. “Keep going back,” God says. “Keep fighting. You may be weak by the standards of society, but you strong and full of value to me; you are *like* me because I also went unheard and unseen in the world.” To those seeking justice, God says: “I see you. I believe you. Your pain is my pain. Keep going back. Persist.”

The hope that we have in God is not the same as the hope we have in society. Society will change; injustice will eventually end, but our hope in God is that God is with us through it all; that God hears us when we first cry out; that God’s love for us will give us the strength to persist; and that God’s justice will transform our lives and the hearts and minds of everyone in the whole world.

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