

Luke 18:1-8

Persistence

A persistent widow comes in front of a judge over and over again, one who could care a less about her predicament, people in general, or whether or not there some God out there who gives a dam. I have heard people break this down to where God is understood to be the judge, but I would say that is not the case in this parable. A parable is a story told in order to teach. In this story the judge is simply the harshest character that one could use as an example and is placed in juxtaposition to a just, loving, present, and compassionate God.

This parable story of Jesus was told as Jesus was being “grilled by the Pharisees on when the kingdom of God would come.”¹ (Luke 17:20) And the answers Jesus gave probably felt like nailing Jello to the wall as he says, “The kingdom of God doesn’t come by counting the days on the calendar. Nor when someone says, ‘Look here!’ or, ‘There it is!’ And why? Because God’s kingdom is already among you.” (Luke 17:21)

This line of rebuttal goes on for a while, about the fact that we cannot know exactly what the timeline is for when the kingdom will come, still we are called to have faith that, even if it doesn’t seem like it, God’s is already here with us. God’s kingdom is already here among us, just as we pray your kingdom come, your will be done, know that the kingdom has already come, it is just not yet revealed in its fullness. We are living in an in between time. The in between where Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension have set in motion a new way of being in relationship with each other and with God, and when the fullness of that relationship will be known fully. (1 Cor. 13:12)

We are told from the get go in the scripture reading today, which flows directly out of this conversation about when the kingdom of God would come, that “Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit.” And the story was of this widow and the judge. But notice that the central character is the widow. Now in the time of ancient Israel provision had been made for widows. The Old Testament has numerous passages on the care for widows in particular. One such passage is Exodus 22:22-24, “Don’t mistreat widows or orphans. If you do and they cry out to me, you can be sure I’ll take them most seriously; I’ll show my anger and come raging among you with the sword, and your wives will end up widows and your children orphans.” Widows were among the most vulnerable of people in society at the time. Someone should have been advocating for her, instead she finds herself having to

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come and plead her own case. We have no idea how the widow's rights have been violated, but so far, she is being ignored and she is pleading for protection.

As the story goes, [The judge] never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on, he said to himself, "I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quite badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice – otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black and blue by her pounding." (18:4-5).

I knew a woman who had this kind of persistent faith. It was back in the early 1970's when women still had to have their husband's signature in order to get a bank loan for a business. This woman wanted to open a bakery. It was her business, and she was a determined woman who wouldn't take no for an answer and though not a widow, she was fighting for her right to be taken seriously as a business woman and have full ownership of what she was about to pour her heart and soul into. That woman was my mother, and her persistence paid off, she got the loan to open her bakery and my dad did not sign the paperwork for that loan.

But all we need do is think of other people, women in particular who made a difference with their persistence. Rosa Parks comes to mind, the American Civil Rights activist who refused to give up her seat at the front of a bus in order for a white person to sit there. Or Viola Desmond, a Black rights activist, who was jailed for defiantly sitting in the "whites only" section of a Nova Scotia film house. Their persistence changed laws and lives. These women were all working toward a just society.

This story of the widow is told by Jesus to encourage those listening then and now to pray consistently and never quit. To be persistent in prayer. We all know though just how hard it is to pray that way. We pray with the hope that God will change our situations, and those prayers are important and valid, and yet I could not tell you how many times I have been called to the hospital, stood beside a bedside where family members are praying for healing, hoping that I will pray for a healing miracle, while all the while knowing that in many cases, at a certain point, no prayer will bring healing other than to relieve the suffering through dying. At that point my prayers are not for healing in this life, but that God is with them, because that is prayer that I know is and will be answered.

People look at me with the hope and the question about the power of prayer, and I wish the answer was simple. People want to believe that God will intercede in the moment and save them however, we know from lived experience that is not the case. If it were, this world would be healed and all harm would end, all suffering would end, because millions of people are praying that prayer every day. We are already being persistent in those prayers.

And yet, Jesus ends the story by saying "So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet."

This is difficult to believe when we look around and see the mess we are in, the plight of the homeless and addicted, the struggle to fight illness, and for some to keep food on the table so tummies do not rumble with hunger. So what is Jesus saying? I think that the last sentence speaks to it, Jesus asks, "But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?" (Luke 18:8)

So, if this isn't about miraculous healing and ending world wars, famine, and natural disaster, what is this passage about persistent prayer getting at? Might I suggest it is about relationship with God. God doesn't ask for persistent prayer because God wants to make you suffer, but rather as a way into relationship and strength. When we are persistent we can be worn down for sure, but we can also be made stronger, more resilient. We find that we trust God to be in whatever struggle we are facing, because against the odds, we persist, we become stronger, able to face challenges in ways we had not understood or been able to previously.

God is present. We know that because when Jesus died, he promised to send the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit would be in the world, in us, reminding us of all that Jesus taught about faith, about relationship with God, and about how we are to be there for the most vulnerable. And maybe that is what we are missing as we read this scripture...the word justice. This prayer is a prayer about justice. The widow was being treated unjustly. It was her cry for justice that was heard.

This is not about praying that you get a good parking spot, or that you give thanks when you make a profit on your portfolio. Though you certainly can give thanks when it happens. This kind of prayer is about bringing the justice of God to bear. The justice of God who is loving and compassionate, who cares about those on the margins, the most vulnerable and having that prayer answered. Though God hears all prayers, and we are called to pray about our needs, it is the needs of those who are suffering from injustice that certainly moves God's heart to compassion. However, in answering that prayer, God who wants to be in relationship with each of us, is trusting us to also be part of the answer to prayer for others.

God will consistently and persistently be present with us. Through Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in us we know that we are not left to our own devices but that God will work in us to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth. This is the ongoing work of God's people right now. To live and pray in such a way as to be part of the healing, justice bringing, loving, and the compassionate reign of Christ to the world.

Why doesn't God just end all suffering now? I don't have a good answer for you. What I do know is that God chooses to work in, among, and through people in order for change to happen. I know that God chooses to be in relationship with people in ways that enact change, healing, and compassion. God calls on us to respond to the injustice around us and restore people and communities to wholeness. And when that happens, we rejoice together. We give thanks. We come to know God with us because we experience God with us.

May you practice this kind of persistent faith so that no matter when, where, or what, our resilience our compassion, and our hope will be a light to the world. God's kingdom is already among us and in us, this we know and trust because of Christ, with Christ, and through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.