

Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost Luke 18:1-8

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. (In the Greek, “so that she won’t give me a black eye”).

At the outset, the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus’s parable is about “the need to pray always and not lose heart.” But this is troubling. Are we really supposed to harass God until we wear God down? Is that what prayer is — bothering a hardhearted God until God caves? When I receive an answer to prayer, is it only because God is sick to death of hearing my voice, and wants me to shut up?

Thankfully, the reading itself anticipates these questions, and wards them off. In case we’re inclined to think of God as the unjust judge, Jesus explains that the parable works by way of contrast: *Unlike* the heartless judge in the story, God “will quickly grant justice” to those who cry out.

But this explanation raises troubling questions, too, because our lived experiences contradict it. Too often, God *does* delay, and our most fervent prayers — for healing, for justice, for protection, for peace — go unanswered. Too often, our struggles with prayer lead us to experience God very much as the judge, turned away from the urgency of our requests for reasons we can’t begin to fathom.

So what are we to make of this parable?

Well, for starters, I wonder if the story is less about God, and more about us. I wonder if it’s about the state of our hearts, and about the motivations behind our prayers. 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.

I want to consider this possibility from two angles. First, what can we learn if we put ourselves in the place of the widow? The parable begins with an exhortation not to lose heart. What does this mean? What does it look like to “lose heart” in our spiritual lives? The words that come to mind are weariness, resignation, numbness, and despair. When I lose heart, I lose my sense of focus and direction. I lose clarity, and begin to doubt God’s intentions. I get irritable and cynical. My spiritual GPS goes haywire, and all roads lead to nowhere.

In contrast, the widow in Jesus’ parable is the very picture of purposefulness, precision, aliveness, and clarity. She knows her need, she knows its urgency, and she knows exactly where to go and whom to ask in order to get her need met. If anything, the daily business of getting up, getting dressed, heading over to the judge’s house or workplace, banging on his door, and talking his ear off until he listens fortifies her own sense of who she is and what she’s about.

Like many of the storied 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), there is nothing vague or washed out about this bold, plucky woman who drives the apathetic judge nuts with her demands. She lives in Technicolor, here and now: “Give me justice! I will not shut up until you do.”

What happens when we pray like the widow? What is prayer for? I can only speak from experience, but 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, and why — these things mature and solidify. My heart grows stronger. It becomes less fragile and flighty. Once in a long while, it even soars. And sometimes — here’s the biggest surprise — these good and substantive things happen *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. Sometimes it breaks my heart. 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. Will I keep asking? Dare I risk humiliation one more

time? Do I still believe that my request is worthy of articulation? Can I be patient? Am I still capable of trusting in the possibility of justice?

Prayer is, finally, a great mystery. We can't know — it's not given to us to know — why some prayers are answered quickly and many others are not. We can't understand why our earnest pleas for justice (or healing, or peace) hit the wall of God's silence and sometimes remain there for weeks, months, years, or lifetimes. And yet, from the heart of this bewildering mystery, 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 fortitude?

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. Which is to say, prayer is not to be taken lightly. We can't always know what gets shaken, transformed, upended, or vindicated simply because we show up again and again in prayer.

But there is a second way to read the parable, too. It might seem like a stretch, but I'm offering it anyway, because it speaks to where I often find myself in my relationship with God. What if I am not the widow in the parable? What if I am the judge, and God (the pleading, persistent one) is the widow? The widow knocking down my door in the hopes that I will soften my heart and attend to the pain, injustice, and sorrow wounding God's very being?

Jesus describes the judge as a man who neither fears God nor has respect for people. Can I honestly say that I never fit this description? Can I honestly profess that I'm never indifferent, irritable, closed off, or unsympathetic? Is it really the case that my heart is always open to the pain and brokenness of others? Don't I self-protect? Don't I police my borders quite compulsively? Don't I say, "It's not my problem. Someone else will take care of it?"

Scripture attests to the fact that God not only hears the cries of the helpless; God is *in* the cries of the helpless. God dwells with the unseen, unheard, unloved, and unwanted. God is the wronged widow crying for justice, pleading with me to listen, to care, and to keep my heart open on her behalf.

The truth is, the judge lives in me, and if the parable this week has anything to offer, it is that prayer alone will wear down my inner judge. It is through persistent prayer that my heart will soften. It is through persistent prayer that every obstacle I place before God — my fear, my shame, my woundedness, my inattentiveness — will be dismantled. In this sense, prayer is first and foremost *for me*. Prayer is the fist that breaks down the doors of my own stubborn and sinful resistance. Prayer is what enables the light of God's compassion to illuminate the darkest and most oppressed corners of human life with hope and compassion.

Not coincidentally, all of our lectionary readings this week are about persistence. The widow persists in her belief that good things will come to her, even when the odds look wretched. Jacob, wrestling the angel in total darkness, persists until the blessing of a new name and a new future are granted to him. The writer of 2nd Timothy encourages persistence, “whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.” And the psalmist reminds himself — and us — that the reason we can be persistent is because God is. God is our powerful and relentless keeper who neither slumbers nor sleeps, who watches over our comings and goings and guards our days and nights. Our persistence can never be in vain, because it is rooted in God’s.

What all of these readings suggest to me is that God delights in those who dare to strive, contend, and wrestle. Wrestling, as it turns out, is not a bad or even a scary thing, because it's the opposite of apathy, the opposite of resignation. It's even the opposite of loneliness. To fight with God — to show up day after day in prayer, to wrestle with our resistance in the darkest hours of the night — is to stay close, to keep our arms wrapped tight around the one who alone can bless us. Fighting means we haven't walked away. Fighting means we still have skin in the game.

When the Son of Man comes, Jesus asks at the end of the parable, will he find faith on the earth? Faith that persists, faith that contends, faith that wrestles? This is the question that matters. Will he find such faith in us?