

## She Persisted

Luke 18:1-8

October 20, 2019

Rev. Emily M. Brown

It's been almost three years now since the catchphrase "Nevertheless, she persisted" exploded into the public consciousness. It emerged from a Senate confirmation hearing for now-former Attorney General, Jeff Sessions. Senator Elizabeth Warren sought to read into the record a letter from Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr., from some thirty years prior regarding Sessions' record on race and civil rights. Unfortunately, some other senators found this reading to be in violation of a Senate Rule which prohibited ascribing "to another senator or to other senators any conduct or motive unworthy or unbecoming a senator." Since Sessions was a senator at the time, his colleagues asserted that it violated the rule to state or imply that he might have done anything racist – quite the conundrum. Warren refused to eliminate the letter from her testimony, and ultimately, my majority vote, the senate voted to not allow Warren to continue her speech. In the aftermath, Senate Majority Leader McConnell defended the Senate's decision with the words: "She was warned; she was given an explanation; nevertheless, she persisted."

The exact context of the phrase has, I think, been mostly forgotten (which is why I rehashed the whole thing just now – to highlight how the slogan has taken on a life of its own, beyond its origins). Meant as a condemnation of Warren's conduct and a justification for having her speech silenced, it has become a celebration of women throughout history who have been persistent in pursuit of their objectives, despite obstacles and opposition. We see it on pins and t-shirts and tattoos, quoted in inspirational speeches, and applied to great figures of history like Rosa Parks,

the suffragettes who sought the right to vote for women, and all manner of female pioneers who led the way in the face of opposition. Perhaps we should think, as well, of the widow in today's parable.

It's not one of Jesus' better-known parables, perhaps because it raises some hard questions. The narrator tells us (although we don't know if this is Luke's interpretation, or the disciples, or a summary of what Jesus himself said) that Jesus told the disciples a parable about "the need to pray always and not lose heart." In the parable, there is a judge who has no fear of God (which we could also understand as "reverence"), nor respect for people. An utterly selfish character, defying both parts of the passage we read each week as "God's Law of Love" – to love God, and your neighbor as yourself. He loves neither, and although he seeks his own ease and comfort, that's not the same thing as loving yourself, is it?

He comes up against an antagonist: a widow. We don't know anything about this widow, or her case. We don't know if she was in the right or in the wrong. We don't know whether her concern was big or small. We don't know what kind of case she was bringing: was it about a property matter, trying to protect her financial interests in her vulnerable social position? Had her husband perhaps died wrongfully or violently, and she was seeking justice against the person who caused his death? Commentators Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington note, though, that the Hebrew scriptures consistently use the figure of the widow as an example of someone marginalized and vulnerable, for whom God commands us to care; likely we are supposed to assume that she is in the right and in need of the justice she seeks in this parable. We can certainly think of legal matters where the "persistent" person was in the wrong and should have dropped the whole thing, but scriptural images of widows are generally sympathetic, and so we are supposed to be sympathetic to this figure.

The widow is portrayed as tenacious, coming to the judge over and over asking for justice. Initially, the judge refuses – he doesn't want the bother of giving her what she seeks, whether it's right or not. Nevertheless, she persists. Finally, the judge is tired of her nagging. The parable portrays him speaking to himself: "Though I have no fear of God, nor respect for anyone, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me down" – that is, literally, "so that she may not give me a black eye" – by continually coming. The widow's persistence is framed as if she and the judge were in a physical fight, with the judge fearing that he's going to get "beaten up" by her unrelenting cries for justice. The judge still isn't considering what's right, or what's fair – indeed we, the listeners, don't know what's right or fair. But the judge, as a figure, is all about doing what's easy, and he has reached a point where giving the widow what she seeks is easier than continuing to ignore her.

We are told that this is a parable about praying always and not losing heart, but the parable itself doesn't seem very uplifting. We don't want to picture God as the hard-hearted, self-absorbed judge. We don't want to picture ourselves as the pestering, bothering widow who harasses God until we finally get our way. Thankfully, though, Jesus takes his interpretation in a different direction – if such a cruel and capricious judge would eventually capitulate to the tenacious widow, *how much more* will a loving God respond to our heartfelt and persistent prayers? The parable seems to reassure us that if we are fervent and persistent in our prayers, God will give us what we seek.

And yet.

We all know of stories of prayers that seemed to go unanswered – of suffering that was not relieved, of opportunities that were hoped for but didn't come, of illnesses that were not cured, of

bitter divisions that went unreconciled. With that in mind, commentator Debie Thomas writes this:

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 [she continues] 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?

Those words – “nevertheless, she persisted” have been adopted as a slogan of female empowerment, a kind of girl power mantra. But what hides right under their surface is that behind every historic move towards a more just and equitable society have been people (women and men) who were so persistent that everybody got sick of them. People who were zealous and strident, people whom others saw as too much, too loud, too needy, too demanding, too single-minded, too pushy, too hard-headed. People who asked for justice so relentlessly that the ones who initially stood in their way surrendered – sometimes because it was the right thing to do, but

often because it was expedient. I'm reminded of Ava Duvernay's film *Selma*, which highlighted the reality that one of the things that turned the tide of the civil rights movement was Martin Luther King Jr.'s savvy use of media to shift public opinion – because elected officials who weren't responding to moral imperatives were responsive to the possibility that they might get voted out of office.

Jesus invites us, in the face of adversity, to that kind of persistence – in our pursuit of a better world, and in our prayers to God. He invites us to discern what we want and need, what we believe we are called to do, and to be persistent in that, no matter the cost. He invites us to let go of the worries about what people will think, the desire to go along and get along, and urges us instead to stand firmly in the promise that persistence and heart will, one day, prevail.

But if you'll permit me one more twist here: what if we are not only supposed to see ourselves as the persistent widow? After all – Jesus would tell the disciples that everything they did for the poor and the vulnerable, they did for him. We see the face of Christ in those who are suffering and needy, down and out – widows and orphans, migrants and refugees, the poor and the incarcerated. And each of us has in us something of that stubbornly self-centered judge. Quoting Debie Thomas again:

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...

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.

In prayer, may we find persistence. In prayer, may our persistence be rewarded – whether in the answer we were hoping for, or in an answer we never imagined. And in prayer, may we encounter God's persistence, nagging us with love, pestering us with mercy, unrelentingly demanding, not satisfied until God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.