

Godly Persistence  
Luke 18:1-8  
October 21, 2007

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about an unjust judge and a poor widow. Like all parables, this story has more than one layer of meaning. One meaning is the one that Luke guides us to when he says that Jesus told it to remind the disciples about the need "to pray always and not to lose heart." This most popular reading of the parable invites us to identify with the widow, pleading unceasingly to an outlaw judge, "who neither feared God nor had respect for people, for her petition to be heard. God is less easily or obviously identified by contrast in this reading with the unjust judge, who after much delay answers the widow's incessant pestering simply in order to get rid of her. The analogy is from the lesser to the greater, a typical ancient rhetorical device, so that Jesus comments after telling the story, that if such a wicked man as the judge when he tires of the widow's pleas, will grant her request, so much more will our just, merciful, and loving God be that much quicker to answer our prayers.

I've always had trouble with that interpretation, even if Luke sets the parable up to be read that way. I don't like the lesser to greater technique; it's a good one, but can only be taken so far. And this is really stretching it. Usually there is some form of commonality between the lesser and the greater. For example, Jesus asks in another place if a parent would give his child a snake, and assuming the answer is a resounding "no" goes on to say, so much more so will our heavenly Father give us good things. But, this judge is in no way like God; he is despicable, utterly selfish, with no redeeming values, no respect for anything divine or human; he is a law unto himself, he has nothing in common with our greater, eternal Judge, other than the mere title – judge. He is the exact opposite of Old Testament judges, who are admonished in 2 Chronicles by King Jehoshaphat to take care what they do, for they are not judging on behalf of human beings but on behalf of God, who judges them. The King explicitly admonishes them to let the fear of God be upon them, and reminds them to act carefully because with God there is no injustice, no partiality, no bribe-taking.<sup>1</sup>

The widow in this interpretation is also portrayed against type. Biblical widows typically are referred to in the Bible as, weak, poor and defenseless. They are lumped together often with orphans and foreigners, persons who are the most vulnerable and without resources. And Scripture repeatedly admonishes that special concern be shown for these persons who are unable to help themselves.

This widow, however, is anything but helpless. She is bold, brash, outspoken, demanding justice ceaselessly until she gets what she wants. She accosts the judge in his own territory, typically a male-only arena, and finally wears him down with her persistence. In fact, he gives in because there's no other way to get rid of her and in his final comment in Greek, indicates that he's afraid she'll give him a black eye. You don't get that sense of combativeness in most English translations, and we have to settle for the idea that he only fears being worn down, or slandered and his good name destroyed.<sup>2</sup> This is one spunky, tough, determined woman, totally bent on having her way, on extracting justice, even from the most dishonest, unjust, uncaring, unaware judge in existence.

So what if, just for the sake of argument, we look at this parable from a different angle. What if we are called to emulate her perseverance as disciples, not because she is a victim who with little influence and power could easily lose heart, but instead with her insistent, unwearying, continual, outspoken demand for justice, represents God. And the judge – well, he's us in all our various manifestations individually and corporately. He's us personally in our own selfishness, complacency, prejudice and resistance to change; he's us communally in all of our political,

economic, and social systems that are unjust, corrupt, and invested in the status quo and the protection of the privileged.

Doesn't that make this parable easier to understand? Not only does the widow seem more "god-like" in her dogged resistance to injustice, naming it, facing it and denouncing it until justice is achieved, so also is another pesky problem with the more traditional interpretation done away with. When the judge is seen as the figure representing God, the story implies that if one badgers God persistently enough, one can eventually wear God down and get a positive response.<sup>3</sup> Now, this is a common attitude towards prayer – after all, Jesus does say, "ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened." But instead of hearing this as another admonition to persevere and not to lose heart, we hear it as technical advice on how to get our way with God. Yesterday in the Church Roundup, a church in Bogart announced that it is hosting an all day seminar soon on "how to Minister and Receive Healing," and the description for the seminar says, "The seminar is designed to train people how to minister healing, see results when they pray, and understand how to receive healing." Did you hear that – "see results"? Is that what prayer is about? Is that why we pray? In order to "see results"?

With the widow playing the part of God in this parable, the story also becomes one of godly power revealed in seeming weakness. And it offers perspectives on the methods that might be used to achieve a just end.<sup>4</sup> It is, after all, the judge that worries about getting a black eye; there isn't an indication that the widow was ready to give him one. Violence isn't part of her strategy. She just keeps on keeping on and never loses heart.

I was reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the power of persistence. In developing his strategy for continual mass non-violent demonstrations, he wrote that he was inspired by Gandhi who'd said about the British, that the Indian people must "never let them rest." and Gandhi had urged them to keep protesting daily and weekly in a variety of ways. King comments, "All history teaches us that like a turbulent ocean beating great cliffs into fragments of rock, the determined movement of people incessantly demanding their rights always disintegrates the old order."<sup>5</sup> And then he says, "Our powerful weapons are the voices, the feet, and the bodies of dedicated, united people, moving without rest toward a just goal."<sup>6</sup> In another place he wrote, "Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God."<sup>7</sup>

So, are you ready to be a "co-worker" with God after the pattern of this feisty widow? There are many ways our discipleship can take shape and make a difference, as many ways as there are people here today. In my Monday morning lectionary group, I heard two examples. Beth Long, rector at St. Gregory, recalled a state legislator for the area of New York where she served a church, who was totally disinterested in the efforts of a local group that was promoting affordable housing for the poor. Beth was a part of the advocacy group, and they continued, day in and day out, to call him, send him letters, visit his office, take him to see the sites that concerned them. And finally, one day, he gave in; he saw the light – they'd beaten him down! And he went on to testify before congress about the need for affordable housing. Through their efforts, they'd made him an instrument of God's justice in spite of himself!

Edward Bolen shared a different kind of story about a woman in his church who at the age of 80 approached one of our local fabric stores to request the old dress patterns that they would be soon throwing away to make room for newer ones. She knew that these patterns could be sent to other countries to help women make much needed clothing. But she was denied despite repeated requests. So, she drove her Cadillac to the alley behind the store day after day and waited, and one day, the patterns were thrown into the dumpster, and she jumped out with her stepladder and climbed into the dumpster, tossing patterns out on to the pavement one after

the other, only to realize then that she couldn't get out of the dumpster. So she picked up her cell phone and called a friend to come and rescue her. She also has arranged with Hartsfield Airport to receive the scissors, that are confiscated from travelers, to send to sewing centers. She now has a warehouse full of items that nobody else wants, but that she can send to places in need.

Jesus asks at the end of this parable, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" In the last two weeks, faith has been described as obedience and gratitude. Today, faith is found in persistence – God's and ours. Throughout our lives God continues to call us; and so long as we live it will continue. We will never arrive at the place where we can say, "I've done it all; God can't ask any more of me." God's call may be different at different times in our lives, but there is always more to do. At times we listen well, and at other times not so well, but "God's voice is never stilled. Each time we hear and respond,[each time we persevere], we become more the [faithful] person God calls us to be."<sup>8</sup> May Christ find us faithful to the end. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara E. Reid, O.P., "Beyond Petty Pursuits and Wearisome Widows: Three Lukan Parables, *Interpretation*, LVI, iii, July 2002, 291.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Reid, 293.

<sup>4</sup> Reid.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Social Organization of Nonviolence," *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James M. Washington, Jr., ed., San Francisco: Harpers, 1986, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> King, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> King, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," *A Testament of Hope*, p. 270.

<sup>8</sup> The Rev. Barbara Beam, "Pentecost 20-Proper 24," October 21, 2004; [ecusa.anglican.org](http://ecusa.anglican.org).