

Persist in Everything

a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Nov. 13, 2022

based on Luke 18:1-8

If you listened carefully to the text read this morning, you heard Jesus tell a story about the plight of a widow woman in his day. I'm sure the people who heard Jesus tell this story could probably name a woman they knew who fit her description perfectly; a woman who chose to speak up because she had to; because, circumstances being what they were in that day, she had no choice but to make a fuss in a world where men rule, and women have to depend on men to do right by them, when too often they do wrong.

She had to ask herself, "Should I speak up, or remain silent," and she decided that to remain silent she would be betraying herself, and her daughters, if she had any, and all other women who were in her precarious position.

Noting those circumstances, I find it absolutely impossible NOT to at least make a quick but obvious comparison (here at the outset) with the events of the past week; a week in which women all over the country spoke up about whether government should have control over their bodies. There were five referendums dealing with abortion rights on Tuesday, in Michigan, Kentucky, Vermont, California and Montana. The abortion rights side won all five – I mean, even Kentucky and Montana.

Let's note that women in Kentucky were much more anxious to support victims of rape than men in that state. No surprise there. In North Carolina, Bo Hines, running for Congress, said women who are raped should go through a public community review process so see if they should be allowed an abortion. Really? He lost.

The parable we are looking at this morning is about persisting in prayer and it follows on the heels of Jesus' very scary story we looked at a month ago about the end of the age. "I tell you," Jesus says to the disciples, "on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left." Then his disciples ask him, "Where Lord?" And he says to them, "Where the corpse lies, there the vultures will gather." The committee that chooses passages for the lectionary left that verse out for some reason. Hmm?

Then Jesus takes a breath and continues with the parable of this persistent widow, which is our clue that he is not talking about just any old kind of prayer.

He is talking about prayer that asks God to come and come soon.— prayer that is more than a little spooked by the idea of being snatched out of bed in the middle of the night -- prayer that begs for God's presence, God's justice, God's compassion—not later, but right now.

Prayer like that can wear your heart out if you're not careful – especially when there is no sign on earth that God has heard you.

You know, a person can only knock so long on a locked door before his hand turns to hamburger. A person can only listen to herself speak into the silence so long before she starts to wonder if she's just 100% alone.

When that happens – when the pain and the doubt gang up on you to the point that you start feeling dead inside – then it's time to get some help, because you are "losing heart." That's Jesus' phrase, and he does not want it happening to anyone he loves. That's why he tells this parable to his disciples about their need to pray always and not lose heart.

You may or may not know that we are in the middle of a series of four sermons preached under the following theme that comes to us from St. Irenaeus: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." To be fully alive is, among other things, to **not** lose heart. People, especially women in this world, are too often tempted to lose heart, to give up. Isn't it good to know that Jesus is totally concerned about that?

Professor and Preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, shares this story about her granddaughter in reference to this parable:

"I have a seven-year-old granddaughter by marriage named Madeline. She is blond, skinny and tall for her age. Last May she came to celebrate her birthday. Dressed in her favorite blue bell-bottoms, Madeline watched the candles on her cake burn down while we sang to her. Then she leaned over to blow them out without making a wish.

"Aren't you going to make a wish?" her mother asked.

"You have to make a wish," her grandfather said. Madeline looked as if someone had just run over her cat.

"I don't know why I keep doing this," she said to no one in particular.

"Doing what?" I asked.

"This wishing thing," she said, looking at the empty chair at the table. 'Last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away but she did.

This year I want to wish that my mommy and daddy would get back together...'

"That's not going to happen," her mother said, 'so don't waste your wish on that.'

"I know it's not going to happen," Madeline said, 'so why do I keep doing this?'

Says Taylor, “No one answered her. It would have been insulting under the circumstances, since her question was better than any response we could have given her. Why do any of us keep wishing for things we know won’t happen? Why do we keep tossing the coins of our hearts’ desires into pools of still water that swallow them up without a sound?” Why indeed.

This is the same problem Jesus was having with his own loved ones. Things were not going well in the prayer department. The disciples wanted God to make clear to everyone that Jesus was just who they thought he was – God’s instant answer to every problem on earth.

But not everyone was ready to accept this. Not by a long shot. In fact there were warrants out for his arrest and even he was telling people that he was not long for this world.

By the time Luke wrote it all down (30 years later) things had gotten even worse. Rome was standing over Jerusalem with a huge torch ready to burn the place down and there was no sign that the kingdom of God that Jesus was always talking about was going to be coming anytime soon.

In short, people were losing heart, so when Luke was making his choice of Jesus’ stories for his gospel, Luke chose this story about the wronged widow who would not stop pleading her case.

Luke does not say what her complaint is about, but it’s not all that hard to guess. Since she is a widow, her case is probably about her dead husband’s estate. Under Jewish law she cannot inherit it, but she is allowed to live off it, unless someone is cheats her out of it.

The fact that she is standing alone in the street is a pretty good indication that none of the men in her family are on her side. If she had any protectors left they would have kept her at home and gone about things in a more conventional manner.

No son wants his mother hanging the family’s dirty laundry in the street. No brother-in-law in Jesus’ day, wants his brother’s widow disgracing the family name.

She has no one watching her back, but, as the judge soon finds out, she is quite capable of taking care of herself. Jesus underscores that this is not a respectable judge, remember? By his own admission he has no fear of God or respect for anyone.

However he got there, he is hard as a stone-wall. God does not get to him, and most people do not get to him, but this widow gets to him, at least partially. Why? Because she throws a mean right upper-cut.

In Luke's original Greek, the judge uses a boxing term for the widow. He says, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out with continued blows to my face under the eye."

Jesus says to his disciples, Listen to what the unjust judge says. Won't God do the same for you, if you too cry out both day and night?

Here's Jesus' point: the woman, though she found herself all alone, did not lose heart.

She knew what she wanted and she knew who might give it to her. Whether the judge gave it to her or not was beyond her control, but that did not matter to her. She was willing to ask for what she wanted—out loud, day and night, over and over—whether she got it or not.

Why? Because saying it was how she remembered who she was. It was how she remembered the shape of her own heart.

Do you know the feeling? I bet you do.

One of the most difficult parts of prolonged trouble (whatever kind it is) is the loneliness that comes with it. Right? You don't want to bore people with your problems, am I correct? Besides, who really understands?

I mean, it's lonely out there. Maybe you know this too well already. It happens to the elderly, but it also happens to the young. It happens because of illness. It happens because of money. It happens when children move away, and it happens when they move back in again.

It may have to do with feeling cut off from family and friends, or a lack of access to transport, or career problems. There's separation; there's divorce. Often it's when people lose a sense of purpose and sense of contribution due to their age.

There is even evidence coming out now that says that social media – even Facebook, is just making people feel lonelier than ever. You know, I believe that we all long for experiences that will make us feel part of something bigger.

When I was very young, every once in a while there'd be a report on television of some child that had fallen down a well, or who got stuck in some impossible dark crevice somewhere, and all day and half the night the rescue would go on.

People would watch for a while and then go on about their business, but their thoughts would be with the child way down in that hole in the earth, as if it were their child or their grandchild.

You'd be out at some public event, or you'd be shopping, and you'd ask if anyone knew the latest on the child, and we would all, suddenly, just for a day or maybe two, be one human family.

And then in the night we'd be watching and watching as the news people were searching for something to say. Then, finally, they'd lift her out dazed by the light of the camera teams, trembling and crying, and everyone in the country would be balling their heads off. Even your father. Remember?

Well, the poor widow in this morning's story is totally alone. When she started pleading her cause at such a high pitch, there were surely many people who were embarrassed by her, or felt sorry for her for exposing herself to such ridicule, but the poor widow was beyond caring about that.

My bet is that she was in a zone. She could not believe how exhilarating it was to stop trying to phrase things "the right way," to stop going through proper channels and acting grateful for whatever scraps life dropped on her plate.

Give me justice! she yelled at the judge. Do your job! Answer me now or answer me later, but know this: I am coming back here every day for as long as I have breath. You will eventually have to deal with me.

So he dealt with her. But I don't think that is the point that Jesus is most intent on. I keep coming back to that sad little question he asks there at the end: "And yet, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

It makes one think that Jesus did not know too many persistent widows, or at least, not enough of them. He must not have known too many people with the faith to stay at anything forever. Then, as now, most people prayed like they brushed their teeth, once in the morning and once at night, out of habit or duty.

Not because they knew that here was a means to protect their very heart.

You know. It's easier to pray merely superficial prayers. "God, if it's your will, let this happen." "God you know best. . . ." If these puny kind of prayers go unanswered, it's less painful than unanswered prayers we pray out of desperation, right? Don't ask and you won't be disappointed.

Don't seek and you won't miss what you won't find.

Yes, but that way leads to rigor mortis of the soul. We lose heart. We lose what it means to be ourselves.

What the persistent widow knows is that the most important time to pray is when your prayers seem most meaningless. If you don't take at least one good swing at the judge, what good is having a hand you can ball up into a fist?

The well-known Iranian activist, Masih Alinejad, is the equivalent of the woman in Jesus's parable for our time. Listen to her confidence. "This ongoing uprising is just the beginning of the end for the Islamic Republic. This is the 21st century and it's not acceptable for that government to kill children or teenagers or schoolgirls for dancing, for showing their hair, for singing or for wanting to have a normal life."

She adds: "The compulsory hijab is like the Berlin Wall: once it falls the whole Islamic Republic will be done. That's why the mullahs are scared. Millions of girls and women in Iran are now standing shoulder to shoulder and saying, "No;" we are ready to die, but we won't live with this humiliation."

At bottom, what Jesus seems to be saying is this, Stand up for what is right, don't cower. Trust that good will win out over evil in time. It is what keeps you true to who you really are. It keeps you engaged with what matters most to you. That way you will not lose heart.

And look what is happening. We here in America may just be on the verge of waking up from our 6 year national nightmare. It's too early to tell, but I am sure tempted to think that long arc of history Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of may just be beginning to bend toward justice ... and sanity.

Amen