

Our Persistent God *Luke 18:1-8*

Shannon J. Kershner
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois

In some ways, this should have been the easiest sermon I have written in a while. Luke tells us right off the bat what this parable is supposed to be about. While introducing Jesus' telling of it, Luke states outright in verse 1 that it is a parable about the need for persistent prayer and the call to not lose heart. Thus, that interpretation should direct the way we hear the parable, right? Maybe.

Let's meet the characters in the parable. First, we have a judge. As a friend of mine said, "We know about judges in Israel. We know their role was to maintain a reasonable harmony in the community and to adjudicate disputes fairly and impartially. [Furthermore], it is particularly worth remembering that Jewish law, the Torah, described a particular responsibility for such judges when it came to protecting the rights of the poor—of widows and orphans and refugees."¹ So that is our judge. Our first character.

And then, we have the widow. Now immediately, when Jesus introduces us to the widow, the drama intensifies. Because, as we just heard, a faithful judge would know of his duty to pay particular attention to people like that widow. Yet herein lies the dilemma—when Jesus introduced us to the judge, he also gave us insight into his character. The judge, according to the parable, was not faithful. He had no reverence for God (what the Bible calls fear of the Lord) or for anyone else.

Frankly, the judge did not seem all that interested in being an actual judge to begin with. He did not seem to really care about even the conceptual idea of justice. He certainly had no concept of compassion. We make those assumptions because of his actions. The judge was not moved one bit by the widow's pleading of her case. "Grant me justice," she said, every single time she went before him. Yet, "No" was always his answer. "No No No No No."

Amazingly enough, though, that widow was never deterred by his denial. I guess she felt that as a widow, she literally had nothing to lose by going to the court every single day and demanding to be heard. Whatever it was, something gave that widow a stubborn determination. Furthermore, she also must have sensed that she was getting to him. So she continued to go to his courtroom again and again and again and again. And while Jesus does not tell us how many times she walked up to that judge and demanded he act with compassion and grant her justice, we do know her persistence, her dogged determination, her sheer unwillingness to give up or to give into his "No" or "Not yet" grated on the judge's nerves.

We know this because Jesus lets us overhear the judge's internal thoughts. "Look, I could care less about God, and I sure don't care about anyone else, but this widow is standing on my very last nerve. So fine, I will give her what she wants so that she will finally leave me alone." And all is well that ends well, because the widow gets the justice she demanded, even if compassion was nowhere to be found and it took much longer than it should have.

For a parable, a type of story typically meant to provoke and disturb, it is strangely

rather cut and dry. Just imagine, Jesus seems to conclude, if this horrible unfaithful judge will finally grant justice for the widow, think of how much more a good and gracious God will compassionately respond to the cries of the vulnerable, the outcast, and the oppressed.

All you have to do, the parable seems to say, is bug God day and night. Keep at it. Don't stop. Your prayers will eventually be heeded sooner or later. But regardless of God's timing, summon the stubborn persistence of the widow. And don't lose heart while you are doing it. Cut and dry. The end? I hope not.

Let's be honest. You know and I know that many of the vulnerable, the outcast, and the oppressed have been praying ceaselessly for the coming of God's justice and compassion to transform the hearts, the institutions, and the structures of our world, and yet, here we are. The wolf does not live with the lamb. Nation continues to lift up sword against nation. Justice does not roll down like waters. Righteousness is not yet like an ever flowing stream.

No, for generations, God's people, people like us, have been lifting our voices to God in fervent prayer, pleading with God to end the violence, to end the wars, to bring about equity for all people, healing for creation. But day after day we learn of another shooting or another bombing or another eviction or another hungry child or another woman assaulted or another man without meaningful employment. Thus, if the sole point of this parable is only to encourage our persistence with God, then frankly, I don't know how much use I have for it.

I've sat by too many bedsides and heard too many stories from people who have diligently gone to God in persistent, stubborn prayer, and yet their prayers for justice and for compassion were not answered in the ways they had hoped. So regardless of how Luke introduces the parable, I cannot get comfortable with the conclusion that the only thing Jesus wanted us to hear is the message that all those people must not have been persistent enough or things would have turned out differently. That kind of vending machine God is not the God to whom I have given my heart. That is certainly not the God I see in Jesus.

So since parables are always meant to be disruptive and provoking, is there another way this parable might work on us, in us? If we do not assume we are in the place of the widow and that the judge is the example of what God is not, then what else might we hear? Actually, what happens if we switch roles? What happens if we sit in the seat of the unjust judge and God takes on the persistent cries of the widow? Now, you might not like that seat assignment, and you might argue you have nothing in common with that unfaithful, unjust, disrespectful judge, but let's stay there for now and listen.

What's the first thing we hear? We hear that widow's cry, God's cry, for justice, for compassion. "I am coming to you on behalf of the vulnerable, the outcast, the oppressed," God says to the Church through her voice. "And trust me," she says, "I am not going to leave you alone until you listen to me, until you act in response to what you hear, until you, as disciples and as an institutional structure, repent of all the myriad of ways you continue to ignore all these cries or dismiss them. I am demanding justice on their behalf. I am demanding that you respond with compassion." God calls out to the Church through the voice of the widow, "Yes, I am going to keep coming to you, Church," God stubbornly says, "again and again and again, no matter how many times your collective words, your collective actions or inactions tell me No or

Not yet. Like the widow, you cannot get rid of me. I will persistently wear you down with my grace,” God claims.

As we sit in the seat of that judge, this parable reveals that no matter how many times we, like that judge, just try to move on with our own lives, take care of our own people, or simply keep our own heads above water, our persistent, stubbornly determined God will keep coming to us. And our persistent, stubbornly determined God will keep challenging us to let the priorities of God’s compassion and justice reorder the priorities of our lives,² of our life. Hear that again: God desires for the priorities of God’s compassion and justice to reorder the priorities of our lives, of our life. That reordering was the widow’s challenge for the judge in the parable. That reordering is God’s challenge for the Church today, for you and for me.

So we have a decision to make—how long will we ignore God’s persistent prodding of us to respond to the cries we hear for justice and compassion—justice and compassion not just for the people we understand or look like or love, but particularly justice and compassion for those who are the vulnerable, the outcast, and the oppressed in our day? Because like that widow, God is not going to stop demanding that we hear those cries and that we respond to what we hear. God loves us just as we are, but God loves us too much to let us stay just as we are. So God will keep pressing us. Like that widow and the judge, God will not give up on us.

In light of that, I must ask you a question. Today, in your life, as you sit on that judge’s seat, what do you think God is persistently calling you to do/to be/to say as a disciple? What call for justice and compassion in our world and in this time is God asking for you to hear and to heed, asking for you to help in enacting? What will God not leave you alone about, no matter how many times you try to brush God off?

As you ponder that, I will tell you mine. Though it has always been a part of my call as a female clergyperson, I believe God is once again bothering me, persuading me, demanding that I, as your pastor, speak up and out in this holy space against the myriad of unjust ways women and girls are actively being demeaned in both daily acts and in our national conversation. As a person who, no matter what the world tries to tell me, is created in God’s image just as much as any man, as a mother of a daughter who, no matter what the world tries to tell her, is created in God’s image just as much as any boy, and after this past week in our world that we have all collectively endured, I can no longer stay silent.

I cannot go along to get along or let my fear of upsetting some of you keep me from testifying—testifying against the daily dismissals and denials of the myriad of ways in which women and those who identify as female regularly encounter aggression against our bodies and against our souls. It starts young and it does not stop. I believe God is persistently asking me, persuading me, to not just let this one go unchecked anymore. Too much is at stake for me to remain silent, for the Church to remain silent.

For did you know that after that tape of the bus conversation with the candidate and the reporter aired, phone calls to this country’s biggest sexual assault hotline jumped 33% over just one weekend?³ The executive director said they had to bring in additional staff and ask their other staff to stay for longer hours. Too many people were calling in distress over memories unearthed or with experiences of verbal and physical sexual assault finally being articulated.

Furthermore, the Friday before the second Presidential debate took place, writer

Kelly Oxford wrote on Twitter about her first experience of sexual assault and asked other women to share their stories in response. Within one evening, she had received one million responses. One million responses. I know from personal experience that we are not making this up. It is not about locker room banter or letting boys be boys. It is about a demeaning and a dismissing of our full God-created, God-given humanity and a passive acceptance of our female bodies as public property. Why else would we have had so many purple ribbons outside during Awareness of Domestic Violence month?

As men and women of faith, siblings in Christ, we all must take this unjust and unfaithful cultural attitude seriously and do what we can to dismantle the idol of maleness as reigning supreme. As Christians, we must speak up when something demeaning is said; carefully consider the ways we speak of God in order to make sure our words are as inclusive and as expansive as our Creator; stop ignoring or denying the stories of pain that so many women carry over past experiences; and do whatever we can inside the church and outside of it to make sure that all of our children, regardless of gender identity, know they are deeply valued and loved.

Because I believe God, like that widow, is going to keep coming to us as Church, as followers of Jesus Christ, again and again and again and again in order to keep asking us why we are not speaking up or acting out in ways that embody God's compassion and value God's call for justice and equity. God is not going to just leave us alone about it. It is not who we are, and the toxicity of that idolatry is damaging our country and it is damaging our souls. My daughter gave me permission to tell you that what she has been hearing scares her. So this is my conviction as to where I feel called to act and to lead in response to our persistent God. What about you?

As you move into this week, take that question with you. Open your heart to hear what God is bothering you about these days. How is God persistently challenging you to allow God's compassion to reorder the priorities of your life, so you might resist the temptation to be only an unjust judge, and instead act in response to God's call articulated through the widow's voice for compassion and justice? Because God will not stop continually coming and doggedly calling and persistently persuading until those cries, God's cries, are answered. Thank God.

Notes

1 Bob Dunham, *Day 1*, October 21, 2007.

2 Alan Culpepper, *NIB*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 339.

3 Heard on NPR, *Morning Edition*, October 14.