

The Radical Rabbi Who Made Up Stories

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Persistent Widow" (artist unknown)

Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

The word for "parable" in Hebrew is *mashal*, which means a proverb or short metaphorical story with a lesson. In Greek, the word is *parabola*, which means "juxtaposition," to set side by side or to draw parallels between one story and another story, or an obvious thing with a more difficult to comprehend thing.

Jesus was radical because he loved to make up stories. He was always yarning and weaving stories. And his stories weren't fluffy. They often poked, prodded, provoked and left you scratching your head afterwards.

Stories help you see new angles and help you live life differently. Jesus didn't just tell us about prayer, perseverance, compassion, or faith, he told us stories about what these things look like in our daily lives. Jesus' stories made his teachings become living and breathing lessons that were totally unforgettable. They are timeless and timely and they grow up with us as we grow old.

Thank God that Jesus' teachings weren't just a bunch of dos and don'ts, bullet points or propositions and principles to memorize. Jesus used earthy things imaginatively—soil and seed, money and fishing nets, sheep and goats, widows and kings to talk about deeper truths for real life.

Stories don't just convey information, they draw something out of your heart, your mind, and your creativity. Stories invite, even demand, a response. They stick in your brain and keep working on you.

Jesus' parables were designed for the confusing and confounding, maddening and messy parts of life. In our passage today, through a story, Jesus told his disciples about the need to pray continually—and to keep on praying, and to never lose heart— even when everything inside of you wants to cave in.

So let's hear now the word of the Lord from:

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV)

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, '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 by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Radical Rabbi Who Made Up Stories

Susan B. Anthony was born two hundred years ago in Adams, Massachusetts. She grew up in a Quaker home and developed a strong moral compass early on in life and she tirelessly pursued justice until the end of her life. Whether it be championing the abolition of slavery or women's rights, Susan B. Anthony was no stranger to scorn, physical and verbal threats, or angry mobs. Opposition and setbacks would not stop her mission. She was fined and arrested for voting in the presidential election of 1872. A year before her death she met with President Theodore Roosevelt to lobby for an amendment for women to vote.

It wouldn't be until 14 years after her death that the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution was passed. It was also known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, which was ratified in August of 1920, 100 years ago next month. Anthony's infamous "aggressive yet compassionate" nature is a reminder of the spiritual tenacity and grit Jesus taught about in the parable of the persistent widow. Persevere in justice, persevere in prayer— in the good times and the hard times. When you're in favor and out of favor. Prayerfully stay the course with enthusiasm—until your time comes to meet Jesus or until he comes back for us.

Never lose heart, says Jesus:

- When justice is being denied.
- When you're facing hardship and feeling alone.
- When there seems to be no end in sight and you're at your wit's end.
- When you're facing persecution or repeated rejection.

Keep praying, keep moving forward. God is just—he is the Righteous Judge and he will surely hear and answer our prayers.

In a certain city there was a judge. He lacked the two most important traits in judges—justice and compassion. He didn't give a rip about people—even vulnerable widows. There is an oft repeated refrain throughout the Scriptures where God reminds his people that they were once slaves in Egypt, and so they were to care for the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan. It's a mantra in the Scriptures and it is found throughout the gospel of Luke especially. Well, this judge would have none of that. He had no fear of God in him. Judges in Jesus' day had the title Dayyaneh Gezereth—meaning "Judge of Prohibitions." But the people had a word play for corrupt judges—Dayyaneh Gezeloth, which means "Robber Judge." This judge was a Dayyaneh Gezeloth judge. He was rotten to the core.

Now in that same city there was a widow who kept repeatedly coming to the judge, day after day—demanding justice. The wealthy had the means to pay off judges to win their case. But this widow had nothing—didn't have means, didn't have an advocate, only her persistence and perseverance. She would be a nag and a nuisance. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Day after day, week after week: "Give me justice against my opponent." Not punishment, not special favors, just justice. This widow took responsibility. She chose to be a victor, not a victim—even with everything stacked against her. She refused to be resigned to the status quo. So she kept going and going rather than giving up or giving in. It reminds me of Martin Luther King, Jr. in his letter from a Birmingham City Jail:

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

So for a long time the judge ignored her. Was he lazy? Did he think she was less than human? Was he afraid of the influence of her opponent? She kept pressing. BUT AT LAST, it was the judge, not the widow, who caved in. He finally rendered a just judgment. Not because he cared or even wanted to. He just wanted to be done with this pesky gnat. "This woman is wearing me out." The widow's persistence won the day.

In the Greek, the term translated "wear me out" is borrowed from the boxing ring. It literally can be translated, "she will give me a black eye." This persistent widow would give even Rocky Balboa or Creed a run for their money, going 12 rounds if necessary. And it was her arm that was lifted up, and she was declared the winner. The power of persistence and the power of prayer.

After finishing the story, the Lord then said, do you not hear what the unjust judge has to say? In other words, learn a lesson from the unjust judge. We can observe and learn from good examples in life, and we can learn from poor examples in life. We watch the good for what to do. We watch the bad for what NOT to do.

You see, God isn't likened to an unjust judge here—rather God is contrasted with the unjust judge. We're to be like the persistent widow. But God is not like the unjust judge. Will God grant justice to his chosen ones who keep crying out to him day and night? Yes!

We can trust God's character. God cares, and God is good, and God acts on behalf of his children. God lovingly listens to his chosen people. And we can trust God in the midst of the delay. We don't have to bother or badger God. Just because God doesn't seem to be acting right now doesn't mean that God is not caring. So keep praying. Keep seeking justice. Don't throw up your hands. Don't throw in the towel. God may delay, but he won't put us off forever. Remember Susan B. Anthony. Her prayers were answered, fourteen years after her death.

Immanuel—there's power in prayer. Prayer pierces the clouds and reaches the heavens. Don't stop praying. Don't stop believing. Prayer energizes us to stay the course. To be faithful, not fearful. I'd like to leave us with four thoughts.

First, Jesus is telling us the pursuit of justice is spiritual— it's a form of prayer. Justice is not the only way to pray, but it's one way. When there's injustice, we can't settle for the status quo. When we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we're praying that God will use us as his instruments to right wrongs, to extend mercy, and bring a little bit of heaven to earth.

Second, we need to get in the sandals of both characters in the story. How might we be like the unjust judge in our own attitudes and actions? And then, how can we learn from the persistent widow and remain prayerful and active in frustrating times?

Third, we can have hope when we find ourselves delayed. During this pandemic, we know a lot better about waiting. But we have hope when nothing seems to be happening. We can trust God because God is trustworthy. What seems like a long time often turns out to be right on time with God.

Fourth, and finally, reflect on Jesus' question at the end of our passage:

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

In other words, Jesus is asking us, will we remain faithful and prayerful throughout our trials? The opposite of losing heart is keeping faith. Learn from the persistent widow. Learn from Jacob who wrestled with the angel, making it clear, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." In other words, how bad do we want this? Are we all in?

Continue the struggle, keep praying day and night, even when it's tempting to give up or give in. Adversity grows us. Be not disenchanted or discouraged. God is no cold-hearted corrupt judge. He tenderly loves you and listens to your prayers. And in due time, he will act. Help is on the way.

Amen.

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