

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 16, 2016
Pentecost 22
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 32:1-30
Psalm 121
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

Our Gospel lesson for today has come to be known as the parable of the persistent widow.

The text tells us that a widow woman who has been harmed appeals to a godless judge for justice to be done. The judge ignores her, but she will not let the issue go. She persists, undaunted. The old word that has often been used to describe this woman is the word “importunity,” which means “persistent urging.” In fact, the word can even be rendered “nagging.”

We should understand that this woman's importunity, or persistence, does not originate from a desire to have a third car in the garage or a new flat screen television for the guest bedroom. Her unflagging zeal is motivated by a desire for *justice*. The term appears five times in these 8 verses. This dear lady does not want a vacation home in the Hamptons. She wants *vindication*. She wants God's will to be done *here and now*, even as it is in heaven.

We know this because of the material that comes just before this passage in Luke's Gospel. Near the end of chapter 17, Jesus is responding to questions about *when* the Kingdom of God would come in its fullness.

In days marked by oppression and injustice, people longed for God's justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness to flow like a powerful stream.

In days of great oppression, they pleaded with God to free them from tyranny. In days marked by great strife, they longed for the day when strife would yield to peace, and when poverty would become abundance.

Their prayers often sounded something like this:

For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep. Wake up, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Get up! Do not reject us forever. Why do you look the other way? Why do you ignore our suffering and oppression? (Ps. 44:22-24)

And so, when Jesus is asked about *when* God's reign would fully arrive, he answers (in part) by telling *this* story of a widow woman who persists and will not be denied.

It's amazing to me that this woman persists and does not lose heart. In this culture, a widow would be a striking image of powerlessness and vulnerability, and a judge would be the image of the oppressor, one with all of the power and the control. Yet in the face of impossible odds, this woman persists.

To be honest, I wish I were more like this woman. Praying for God's will to be done, she did not lose heart. But sometimes -- I *do* lose heart. Whether it's praying for God's will to come in its fullness, or praying for personal needs, I have to be honest with you this morning and tell you that I sometimes get discouraged.

Every week we pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." But then we walk out of the doors of the church, and it is painfully obvious to us that the world is not yet what it ought to be.

It is enough to make us add our voices to that ancient prayer we just heard from Psalm 44: "Wake up, O Lord? Why do you sleep? Why do you look the other way? Why do you ignore our suffering and oppression?"

We pray for that day to come when things will be put right. We are promised that *one* day things will be different. But when does "one day" become *today*? How long must our dogged persistence in prayer continue before we see God act? Apparently, this widow woman in our text did not struggle with discouragement and "prayer fatigue." But God knows *I* do. Perhaps you do also.

One of the things this widow woman's story shows us is that praying for God's kingdom to come in its fullness requires *continual effort and persistent action*. Praying for God's will to be done in our world is a process of *asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting*. Sometimes this process can cause us to grow

weary. At other times it can cause us to grow *angry*. Sometimes, the foremost question on our lips is the question: “How long, O Lord?”

Praying for God’s will to be done in its fullness is not for sissies. It is not for the faint of heart. It is not for the naïve and the easily distracted. One preacher said it like this: "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is." [Quoted in *Interpretation: A Bible*

Commentary for Preaching and Teaching. Ed. James L. Mays. *Luke*, Fred Craddock, p. 210]

The widow woman in our text knew this truth from her own painful experience. She saw the need for justice, for compassion, for God's will to be done in its fullness. And so she reached up her hand and began knocking on the door of heaven. She knocked, and she knocked, and she knocked some more, until her knuckles were likely bloodied and bruised. But she would not relent.

Is it possible, as we pray for God's will to be done in *our* lives and our world, that the same can be true for us? Is the experience of this woman also our experience?

I believe it is. And I have a theory as to why persistence in prayer may be as necessary for us as it was for her. I wonder if the long days and nights and weeks and months of prayer are necessary *in order to make us ready to receive God's answer when it finally does come to us?* Think about it. We pray for God’s

kingdom to come in its fullness. But are we really sure we are ready for that, and all that it might mean?

God is not like the unjust judge in the parable. In fact, God is quite unlike him. God is more ready to hear than we are to ask, more ready to answer than we are to pray. *But sometimes we are not ready in our lives to receive that for which we pray, and God in his love must work on us and in us in order to get us ready. What looks like dogged persistence on our part may be God's way of shaping us into vessels that can hold the answers when they finally do come to us.*

And so, take heart this morning. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, through the encouragement of one another, through the means of grace, and through the Eucharist, *we shall not give up and we shall not give in.* The grace we receive today empowers us to continue praying, to continue believing, to continue banging our bloody fists against the door of heaven.

It *will* open. The bread and wine are tangible signs this morning that the door will open. They remind us not merely of the fact that God's kingdom is present in the world, but also of the fact that it is coming in its fullness. So come and receive his grace today with joy. Then keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.