

Sermon: The Persistent and the Misjudged

Written by: Rev. Jessica Ashcroft-Townsley

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

“Nevertheless, she persisted.” You may remember this quote, uttered by then Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell during the confirmation hearings for Jeff Sessions as Attorney General. Senator Elizabeth Warren spoke boldly in objection to Sessions’ nomination, and the Senate eventually voted that she stop speaking. At that point, McConnell addressed the situation saying, “she was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.” Whether your political beliefs make you a Warren fan or not, there can be no denying that she was then and is now a leader known for her tenacity and persistence in using her voice to call attention to issues that matter to her. The successful attempt to silence her voice on that day to expediate action on the Senate floor led McConnell’s quote to become a rallying cry for women all over, as it went viral. In many circles, it is still a hashtag used on social media when women speak up for what they believe in.

I bring this up not to be political from the pulpit, but to illustrate the way persistence is viewed by people on different sides of an argument. And yet, if you asked people about positive character traits, persistence or determination would be among the most popular. I remember that very word being used to describe me when I was in high school trying to keep going and graduate on time after my diagnosis of lupus. It’s used to celebrate athletes who finish a race despite an injury. It has been used to describe Thomas Edison who is said to have failed 1,000 times before his success with the light bulb, Vincent van Gogh who sold only one painting in his lifetime but kept painting, and the scientists at NASA who failed many times in their attempts before finally launching a rocket into space. Persistence, by and large, is lauded as a trait that will lead to success. Persistence will succeed where talent gives up.

This month, we began our “Bad Girls of the Bible” study and are discussing women of whom this trait could be applied. Just this week, we considered Delilah who certainly

displayed a great deal of persistence as she pursued the secrets to Samson's strength and secured a future for herself in a time and culture that was not kind to unattached women. For better or for worse, without persistence, the story of Samson and Delilah would have ended very differently.

Delilah's story isn't the only one that displays the value of persistence, scripture is replete with stories that include an element of how determination pays off in the end. This lesson is so vital to living that even the parables of Jesus, many of which are notoriously challenging, do not evade this lesson. Today's passage from Luke 18 tells a brief story about a widow who appears before a judge who will go on to misjudge her situation. We don't know what the situation is or who her opponent is, but we are given to understand that this widow has asked for justice to be served, but has appeared before a judge who refuses her. For how long or how many times she asks, we don't really know, but we do know it was enough times for the text to tell us, "*for a while*, he refused." And yet, so persuaded is the woman of her cause, that she continually comes before the judge to ask for justice. He refused her again and again. Nevertheless, she persisted. Finally, the judge, exhausted by being continually "bothered" by this widow's request, grants her justice. That's what the text says, that the judge relents and grants her justice so that she will leave him alone.

Against all odds, the widow pleads her case again and again until the unjust judge finally says he's had enough, and gives in. Luke prefaces this parable this way, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Pray always and not to lose heart. Prayer is not mentioned in the parable, but persistence in the cause of justice is. God is a God of justice, so God is not like the unjust judge, that's not the comparison Jesus draws for us. And to suggest here that the judge is representing God in this parable would be, in the words of the UCC's own Cheryl Lindsay, "an affront to the character of God. The judge, if anything, personifies injustice itself." The judge in this parable is not interested in justice, but neither is he interested in serving God. He's not sympathetic and is not interested in the law. He has, in his own

words, “no fear of God and no respect for anyone.” He gives in because he’s just tired of the nuisance of this widow who will just not leave him alone.

The sketch is drawn to be absurd, what kind of judge isn’t interested in justice? Yet we see this kind of attitude frequently when people have too much power and too little empathy: callousness and self-interest reigns supreme. We know God is not like this judge because everything he does is the antithesis of the God we see through the incarnate presence of Jesus, himself. And Jesus goes on at the end of the parable to make this very clear: “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.” God is not unjust. God calls us to do justice. But waiting for justice and fighting for it is exhausting when it seems the world becomes more corrupt by the moment. And yet we’re told we must persist in the cause of justice even when things seem at their worst, even when every system in society seems stacked in favor of the powerful, even when the leaders rule oppressively over the weak and the marginalized. Yes, even then, especially then, we must pursue justice relentlessly, with a tenacity and constancy that outdoes the injustice perpetrated by those motivated by self-interest and callousness.

Jesus is telling us to keep going. In this part of the gospel story, Jesus is preparing the disciples for what things will be like when he leaves. He is telling them that no matter how bad things get, no matter the long, hard road ahead, no matter what unjust rulers put them through, they must keep going for the coming of the true justice in the kingdom of God. He calls them to be like the widow, to work relentlessly for the cause they serve. To be faithfully persistent. Even if their voices seem as small and ignored as this widow’s voice would have been in this time, they must keep lifting them; they must keep going. They must be determined in their cries for justice, just like the widow who kept coming back to the judge.

Just as the apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, Jesus is telling the disciples to “Make their life a prayer.” If the widow’s cries for justice were heard even by this cold, callous, unjust judge, there is no reality in which a loving,

Creator God will not hear the cries of God's people. The widow makes her life a prayer. The work we do for others as part of the ministry of this church is like a prayer, isn't it? Our efforts not to let children go hungry during the school day or at home is a kind of prayer. Reaching out to the community with Vacation Bible School is like a prayer. Giving to support various projects of NESAP is like a prayer. Ensuring the Christmas morning smiles of children in need by donating gifts during the holiday season is like a prayer. Supporting refugee resettlement is like a prayer. Giving money for medical debt and hurricane relief is like a prayer. Working toward a better world with every move we make is like a prayer. It is the active prayer of a people who seek to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. It is the active prayer of a people who understand that God calls for us to participate in the coming of the kin-dom of God. It is the active prayer of a people committed to community and to one another, who are willing to do what it takes to keep hope alive in Manchester, Maryland and beyond.

Like Paul, we must "press on toward the goal" we seek. We don't know what the widow's cause was, beyond that she asked for justice. She was denied and nevertheless, she persisted. We may or may not agree with Elizabeth Warren's political views, but as she fights for justice and is again and again denied, even today, she, too, persists. Thomas Edison, NASA, injured athletes who keep going: what these stories teach us is we must keep running the race. Our work must be a relentless pursuit to do better for a world crying out in pain each and every day. If even an unjust judge will relent to the persistent cries of a marginalized widow, why wouldn't our generous and loving God aid a faithful people seeking to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly?

Jesus never pronounced that the spread of the gospel, the bringing of the kin-dom, doing justice, and loving your neighbor, would be easy. Jesus is preparing the way for the disciples because he knows it's going to be hard work. And I think that we see that. Serving others is not easy. Going to the margins is not easy. Looking at and trying to help solve the pivotal gospel issues of poverty, racism, sexism, ablism, ageism, homophobia and transphobia, is not easy. But that's what it means to be the church. That's what it means to seek justice. That's what it means to follow in the path of Jesus.

Listen, I know it's hard. It's hard to be the church these days. It's hard to look at pews filled with fewer people than we're used to. It's hard to hold events that aren't as well attended as we want them to be. It's hard to see giving declining as we're trying even harder to live into the gospel imprint. It's hard to faithfully show up every week when the future is so uncertain. It's hard to hold onto hope even with a God as loving, merciful, and just as ours. It's hard.

Nevertheless, we must persist.

Amen.