

October 19, 2025
Proper 24-C
Trinity, St. Louis
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Genesis 32:22-31

Psalms 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

In the Name of God, the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

Although this is not Sesame Street, we do have a word of the day ... persistence. In today's reading from Genesis, we parachute into the story of the long-simmering feud between Jacob and Esau. Two dozen years earlier, Jacob had swindled Esau, his elder brother, out of his inheritance from their father Isaac. Esau was so angry that he swore to kill Jacob, who fled far away finding work with Laban, the father of Leah and Rachel, both of whom Jacob eventually married.

Now, Jacob and his family are traveling back home, to reconcile with Esau. Sending everyone and everything on ahead, across the River Jabbok, Jacob is left alone. From somewhere, a man appears, and wrestles with Jacob all night. When the stranger saw that he wasn't winning, he put Jacob's hip out of joint. Then he cried, "Let me go – it's almost daybreak."

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Jacob is persistent. Even when injured with what may be the first recorded case of sciatica, Jacob asks for a blessing. In turn, he receives not only a blessing, but also a new name – Israel.

The Apostle Paul urges Timothy to persist in proclaiming the good news *whether the time is favorable or unfavorable*.

And so, we come to Luke, whose feast day we observed yesterday. By the time Luke was writing his gospel, a generation or so after the Resurrection, people were beginning to feel discouraged. They were weary of waiting for the deepest desire of their hearts – that Jesus would return and, finally, bring all things to fulfillment.

They were also tired of being persecuted, not only as a tiny little minority in a great big, powerful empire, but also within Judaism itself. They were anxious and they were suffering.

At first glance, today's gospel tells us about persistence; about not being discouraged, about not losing heart while we wait. But I wonder if, in our own anxiety and discouragement, we've domesticated this passage, reducing it to an instruction to

“nag” God with our repeated requests, so that God, like a weary and worn-out parent, would eventually give in and give us what we want. Let’s see, shall we?

Once again, Luke shows us Jesus telling the disciples (and, by extension, us) how God works in the world. And, once again, he does so in a parable, a story that starts out simply enough.

“There is this judge,” says Jesus, which must have made the disciples pay attention. You may remember that, before Israel had Kings, they had Judges. In fact, God wasn’t thrilled about giving Israel a King, but that’s another sermon. The job of Judges in Israel was to settle disputes fairly, to maintain harmony within the community. The Torah describes particular responsibilities for Judges when it came to protecting the rights of widows and orphans and strangers. This verse from Deuteronomy (27:19) is typical: “Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.”

So, we have a judge. Then Jesus says, “there is this widow,” and the plot thickens. A judge and a widow, in the same story, automatically raises the stakes. Any God-fearing judge would feel obliged by the Torah to take especially good care of a widow. In Luke’s world, widows were, for the most part, voiceless and powerless.

So – as is often the case in Luke’s gospel, here’s a how-de-do: a judge who doesn’t care about the law, and a widow who will not remain silent.

Like other widows lifted up in the Bible – the widow of Zarephath, who feeds the prophet Elijah; or Anna, the prophetess who awaits the infant Messiah in the Temple; or the generous widow whose mite Jesus commends – there is nothing generic about this particular, plucky woman we hear about today. She persists, and she insists, bothering the judge until he’s fed up with the sight of her.

“I will grant her justice,” he says to himself, “so that she may not wear me out.” Or, in another reading of the Greek, “so that she won’t give me a black eye.”

About this persistent woman, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “She is willing to say what she wanted – out loud, day and night, over and over – whether she got it or not, because saying it was how she remembered who she was. It was how she remembered the shape of her heart...”¹

The shape of her heart. What might the shape of this intrepid widow’s heart have to do with how God works in the world?

For most people, this parable has been seen as suggesting that persistence in prayer is a marker of the depth of one’s faith, as we see in this widow who persists

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Bothering God” in *Home by Another Way*.

against all odds in her fight for justice. This forceful woman (*about whom we will sing a bit later*) is a model for any and all who cry out for justice in a world that too often thinks that freedom, for us, requires the oppression, or elimination, of them.

Of course, there's not much question as to the meaning of this parable because Luke bookends it with interpretation. Luke tells us why the parable is important at the beginning, then recounts Jesus offering his own interpretation at the end. This is a story about persistence in prayer and God's eventual responsiveness and compassion. Well, it is...isn't it?

So, let us look around. Two thousand years later, the poor and oppressed still cry out for relief and for justice. But, for the most part, the world doesn't seem to be much closer to being a place where justice and compassion prevail than it was when Jesus told this parable.

If we read this parable only as it is usually read, as urging us on to relentless prayer – with its outcome assured – there is always going to be some disconnect, some lack of evidence that prayer really makes any difference at all.

How often do you feel that God isn't answering your most fervent prayers – for healing, for racial justice, for peace among nations, for lowering the fever of our ailing planet? Is it because you haven't prayed hard enough, or often enough, or used the right words?

Some would say that Jesus was really talking about our heavenly reward in the great by-and-by, some sort of deferred compensation. But, if that's the case, the claim for persistence and urgency rings hollow.

And yet, *all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching* (2. Tim 3:16). Because this is not fable with an either/or moral, but a parable, containing multiple (both/and) interpretations, I think we might have some liberty in wondering about other meanings that could stand alongside the traditional narrative?²

What happens if we shift our perspective, if we rotate the stage a little bit? What if the characters in the story switched lines – if the widow stood in for God, and the judge became ... us?

² Hebrew scholar Wilda Gafney describes this ancient practice, Midrash as discerning "value in texts, words, and letters, as potential revelatory spaces.", "They reimagine dominant narrational readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside—not replace—former readings. Midrash also asks questions of the text; sometimes it provides answers, sometimes it leaves the reader to answer the questions." See Gafney, Wilda (2017). *Womanist Midrash : a reintroduction to the women of the Torah and the throne* (First ed.). Louisville, Kentucky.

What if could we hear this story as a testimony to the persistence of God, who wants us to grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry out day and night? If we can tune our ears this way, even just a little bit, then this parable speaks of the resolute, persistent, unrelenting, determined One who keeps knocking on our door, challenging us to respond; a God who will not leave us alone until our resistance is broken down.

Jesus describes the judge as a person who neither fears God nor respects people. Does that sound like a mirror that we would rather avoid? How often do we fit this description? How often are we indifferent, irritable, closed off, or unsympathetic?

Are our hearts always open to the pain and brokenness of others? Don't we self-protect ... sometimes? Don't we make sure our fences don't have any holes ... sometimes? Don't we say, "It's not my problem. Someone else will take care of it" ... sometimes?

Scripture tells us that God doesn't just *hear* the cries of the helpless; God is *in* the cries of the helpless. God dwells with the unseen, unheard, unloved, and unwanted. God is the wronged widow crying for justice, pleading with us to listen, to keep our hearts open on her behalf.

The widow's persistence was how she remembered her identity, the shape of her heart. In the same way, God's persistence is how God remembers who God is, the shape of God's heart.

And that persistence is the way that God reminds us of the shape our hearts, because...that unjust judge dwells in all of us. Today's parable reminds us that only persistent prayer will wear down that inner judge. Persistent prayer is the clenched fist that breaks down the doors of our own stubborn and sinful resistance.

Through persistent prayer, every obstacle that you or I place before God – our fear, our shame, our woundedness, our inattentiveness – all of these obstacles will be dismantled, allowing the urgent and unrelenting light of God's compassion to shine into the dark corners of our world where the oppression of others is still called freedom by some.

Persistence is how God works in the world. Think about Jonah, running in the other direction but finding that he couldn't run far enough to get away from God. Or St. Paul, breathing fiery righteousness in his persecution of the people of The Way, until God caught up with him on the road to Damascus. Or St. Augustine, reveling in his decadent life until his conversion, and then writing the beautiful lament, "Late have I loved thee, O beauty ever ancient and ever new; late have I loved thee."³

³ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book 10, Chapter XXVII.

In our own day, God's persistence bears fruit every time someone begins to look at a person they've always thought as "one of them" as "one of us" who desires and deserves the abundance that God dreams for everyone. God's persistence blossoms every time a suffering addict or alcoholic admits defeat at the hands of chemicals, and opens their heart to the God who's been knocking on their heart's door all along.

The late Frederick Buechner commented that persistence is paramount, "not because you have to beat a path to God's door before God will open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of [God] getting to your door."⁴

Each and every day, in ways large and small, the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps calls to each of us, persistently crying out, "behold, I stand at the door and knock." As we become persistent in prayer, the ears of our hearts will turn down the volume of what we ask God to do for us and become better tuned to the persistent sound of God' knocking on the doors of our hearts. When you hear that sound, no matter how faint, for heaven's sake, give God a break and open the door. It will change the shape of your heart. Amen.

⁴ Buechner, <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/4/25/prayer>.