

Sunday Sermon October 19, 2025

I love the parables that Jesus tells in the Gospels – with a few exceptions – and today's is one of the exceptions. "The Parable of the Bothersome Widow" it is sometimes called. Or maybe "The Parable of the Unjust Judge."

I always take issue with Luke, the Gospel writer, that this is a parable about "the need to pray always and not to lose heart." That characterization could cause us to think that God is the unjust judge who has no respect for people. We are to be like the widow who pesters and harangues God until God relents and does what we want.

That's not the image of the merciful and loving God we see and know in Jesus, and it's not a great image of the widow either. Some preachers drift into portraying her as hysterical, demanding and hotheaded, but the text simply says she persistently approached the judge with her request for justice. "Grant me justice..." Grant me justice. Repetitive and persistent like going to church each week, or like good deeds done over and over again.

It might help to remember that there are other faithful, persistent widows in the Bible. There was Tamar in the Book of Genesis who fought for her right to bear children in the face of great odds. There's Ruth, a loving loyal, persistent daughter-in-law who wouldn't let her mother-in-law return home without her, and who uttered the famous words: "where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God." Not taking "no" for an answer!

There's Bathsheba, made a widow by King David's treachery, she would not let David overlook her son Solomon as his successor. Persistent seekers of justice in the Hebrew Scriptures. They are part of Matthew's genealogy. Jesus' great-great grandmothers.

We also find faithful and persistent women in the Gospels. There's Anna, who at the beginning of Luke has been fasting and praying day and night in the temple for more than 60 years, longing for the Savior's birth.

There's the widow of Nain, whose only son had died and was being carried out of town for burial until Jesus raised him from the dead. There's the generous, faithful widow who puts "all she had to live on" in the temple treasury. The Samaritan woman at the well, an outcast who engages in the longest conversation Jesus had with a woman. And others.

Faithful, persistent, they clung to God's will against opposition and against voices that told them "God doesn't care about you." They sought justice for themselves and a better world for all.

I know a woman who discovered all the barriers that people who have a disability face after she had a disabled son. She worked tirelessly to convince the school board that her son's schools should be accessible. "Too expensive" they said. "Too impractical for such a small number of students" She heard "no" over and over, but she kept fighting until her persistence paid off. Her son's schools were made accessible.

I think of the efforts of LIFE – Lee Interfaith For Empowerment – people from our church and other faith communities in Lee County working on affordable housing, mental health care and other challenges in our community. Seeking structural reform and systemic change.

Recently my sister was telling me about a friend of hers, and immigration attorney, who's working tirelessly for asylum seekers and immigrants in the face of much resistance and hostility. But she persists...

I think of women who fought for civil rights like Rosa Parks and Ida B Wells. Women who fought for women's rights like Susan B Anthony and Sojourner Truth. Women who fought for equality in our church, like the Philadelphia 11 and their allies in 1974.

Ridiculed, even threatened, for "going too far" – but they did so, as they say, so that others "would go far enough."

Faithful, persistent seekers of justice and equality in the face of powerful forces that sought to sideline and silence them, just like the widow in today's parable. Lots of persistent widows in the Bible and in Jesus' life.

It's interesting to note that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem when he tells today's parable about the widow. In Jerusalem, Jesus would be a lot like the widow.

He stood before a series of unjust judges: the Sanhedrin - who were only looking for the evidence they needed to send Jesus to the puppet King, Herod, who would send Jesus to Pontius Pilate, who sentenced Jesus to death even though he had "found no evidence against him."

Unjust judges, more concerned about their positions of earthly power than they are about an innocent man's life. As one commentator said:

"The widow in the parable goes before an unjust judge to obtain justice against her opponent. Jesus goes before unjust judges to obtain salvation for an unjust world."

Today's parable is not about badgering God until God gives us what we want. It's about persistent prayer that inspires us to challenge unjust systems that discriminate and dehumanize. It's about life in God that compels us to stand up for the defenseless and powerless, standing with those dismissed and cast aside.

May the widow's and Jesus' examples of standing firm and speaking out in the face of injustice inspire us to do the same. Amen