

Proper 24 C Sermon  
Luke 18:1-8  
October 16, 2022

*“Pretty Please”*  
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*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

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I still remember the Sunday evening when “The Rule” was implemented in my family. I was in grade school and we were at church—where else would we be on a Sunday evening! The church had one of those great old pop machines—the kind where you put in your money and a door unlocks allowing you to pull out a single glass bottle of ice cold soda. I really wanted one. I began by asking my mother, who said no. So I asked my dad and he gave me the money for a soda. My mother saw me with the bottle and apparently had words with dad because on the car ride home he laid out the new rule: if one of them says no to a request and we proceed to ask the other, we will receive a spanking. The moral, I was convinced

from then on, was to ask the parent most likely to acquiesce first, because there would be no second chances!

In our reading from Luke's gospel, it almost feels like Jesus is telling us to do the opposite of my dad's rule—encouraging us to badger the divine until we get what we want! A widow, the parable goes, was seeking justice. Now, the judge in this story is described as a man “who neither feared God nor had respect for people”—not exactly the type of person we expect to be sympathetic to the widow's cause. And at first, he isn't. But she didn't give up—she embodied the old adage of “if at first you don't succeed, try, try again.” Eventually, she wore the judge down. Tired of her nagging and worried about his public image, he finally gave her the justice she so longed for.

In Hebrew, the word for widow means “silent one” or “one who is unable to speak.” In those days, widows may have been among the least likely people to receive justice. I suspect that's why the Bible is full of admonitions to care for widows, but even so, they were reliant on others' willingness to heed those admonitions. This widow, however, became an actor in her own story. She was a victim of injustice and despite being a widow, a voiceless one, she found her voice and repeatedly brought her case before the only person who could grant her a fair ruling—the judge.

On the surface, this text seems to imply that begging God for justice repeatedly and with a pretty-please-with-sugar-on-top-and-a-cherry is the only way to ensure a divine response. Through the years, it's certainly been interpreted this way. Isn't this basically how most people understand prayer anyway? If someone is ill, we pray for healing. If groups of people are trapped in an unjust socio-economic, political, or criminal justice system, we pray that they'll have strength to carry on or that God will improve the situation. If children are victims of a school shooting or communities are ravaged by natural disaster, we hold them in our thoughts and prayers.

We seem to expect that if enough people pray, God will intervene. If enough people badger God long enough, God will finally relent and give us what we're praying for, not because God actually cares, but because God is tired of all the nagging. And yet, the God of the Bible is portrayed as one who cares deeply—as one who is unequivocally on the side of those poor and powerless, marginalized and oppressed, widow and outsider, with the voiceless ones. The God of the Bible needs no convincing that their plight is real and their petition is just.

And that makes me wonder if God really is the judge in this story. In fact, I'm fairly certain that God isn't the judge. Instead, I'm inclined to believe that God is the widow, knocking persistently on the doors of justice, tirelessly beseeching the ears of power, relentlessly raising her oft-silenced voice. If God is the widow, it's us, I think, who are represented in this story by the judge. God is persistently beating on the doors of *our* hearts to hear the voiceless ones, to see their need, and to work for justice. What will it take for us to respond?

Hear now another parable, this one called "The Chickadee and the Wild Dove."

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a [chickadee] asked a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing," was the answer.

"In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story," the [chickadee] said. "I sat on a branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow, not heavily, not in a giant blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn't have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you say—the branch broke off."

Having said that, the [chickadee] flew away. The dove, since Noah's time an authority on the matter; thought about the story for a while and finally said to herself: "Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking for peace to come about in the world."<sup>1</sup>

One final snowflake, the 3,741,953<sup>rd</sup> snowflake, to be exact, finally snapped the branch. How many snowflakes will it take for those with power to respond, for us to respond, for the judge to finally relent and give in to the widow's request for justice?

In the beginning of our text, the narrator tells us that Jesus told the parable of the widow and the unjust judge to teach "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." If indeed this text is to teach us something of the power of persistent prayer, I think it's this: that justice is central to living prayerfully; that we must pray with our eyes open to see the injustices in the world around us and our ears open to the silent cries of the voiceless ones in our midst; that we must pray with our hearts wide open and our bodies ready to act.

Reflecting on his participation in the historic 1965 civil rights march, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."<sup>2</sup> His prayer was embodied in action. And that is our call too.

This morning and this week, let us consider: who might be the widows—the voiceless ones—in our world today? How might we be challenged to see their plight, to hear to their calls for justice, and to live lives of faithful action? May God give us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts wide open, and bodies ready to act. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Kauter, Kurt, *Also Sprach der Marabu*, Greifenverlag zu Rudolstadt, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Collins. "Jewish Voices from the Selma-to-Montgomery March," Duke.edu, January 14, 2015, <https://blogs.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/2015/01/14/jewish-voices-selma-montgomery-march/>.