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Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost October 20, 2013

“The Parable of the Persistent Widow”

(Luke 18:4-5)

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“For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps pestering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not wear me out by her continual coming’ (Luke 18:4-5).

Collect of the Day

“O Lord, almighty and everlasting God, You have commanded us to pray and have promised to hear us. Mercifully grant that Your Holy spirit may direct and govern our hearts in all things that we may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.” **Amen**

You have to love the stories Jesus tells! There are only two characters in this parable, and both of them are in their own ways unpleasant and disagreeable. First, there is this widow who does nothing but complain. She has a grievance against someone and she just won't let go of it. She goes to a judge for justice. He's not interested, but she won't take no for an answer. She keeps coming back. We may admire her persistence from the safe distance of 6000 miles and 2,000 years, but if you were a teenager, you would not want this one as your mother. “Did you wash your face? Did you wash your face? Doesn't look like you washed your face yesterday either. Look at that! Just look at that! A blind man could read your face! I don't care if you're going to be late; wash your face!” Those who persist in this way are generally not very likeable.

Then there's the other character in this parable: the judge. He's arrogant, prideful, overbearing. He freely admits that he “neither fears God nor cares about man.” Those above and below him mean nothing to him. He is aloof and hard-hearted. He's an iceberg. He's seen it all and has become jaded by it all. Jesus calls him unjust. And as you wouldn't want that widow as your mother, nor would this crusty old judge be a prize as a father.

So we have two disagreeable people locking horns. 99 times out of a 100 the judge would win that contest, right? Remember, in that culture a widow was the easiest person to ignore. Her plight would

mean nothing to a heartless old judge. She has no resources of wealth or influence with which to sway him. All she has is “staying power.” She’s a grinder. That’s her one trump card and she knows how to use it. It’s not about luck or providence or preparation. The only way she can get this guy to give her justice is if she wears him down. She knows sooner or later he’ll cave, if only to get rid of her. So, she plays the one trump she has and starts pestering him day after day after day.

Couldn’t Jesus have made up a better hero to describe persistence? Maybe a Roman Gladiator who endures one contest after another against man and beast? But no, Jesus chooses a little old widow who pales beside all the heroic figures we can think of. She is so *ordinary*! And maybe that’s why Jesus chose her in the first place, so that we might identify with her. After all, we are fairly ordinary people too, aren’t we? I’m not looking at legends of the gridiron. I’m looking at honest to goodness Wisconsinites. By making this widow so ordinary, we can all identify with her. After all, the one trump card dealt the old widow has been dealt into your hand as well. Most of us were not born into wealth and influence, but every one of us has the capacity for perseverance.

The most annoying tennis players for me are those I secretly think of as “scrappers.” They never had any lessons, never learned form or technique. Warming up with them, one glance at that backhand and you think, “Oh, this is going to be easy!” But then the match begins and they are relentless. They chase everything down. They refuse to give up on a point or a game or a set. You cannot break their spirit, but if you’re not careful they’ll break yours! It’s like playing against a wall, a wall with bad form. But because of their perseverance they win a lot of matches.

Perseverance, tenacity, persistence! Most of us would choose to be a wealthy and influential judge over against a poor and powerless widow. But in this story, it’s the widow who wins the contest because she has grit

and determination. Instead of preparing our children for success, maybe we would do better to prepare them to cope with failure, for when things don't turn out right –at school, in their careers, their marriages, their plans. We should be nursing along their capacities for endurance and rejection.

By the way, more and more, corporations are looking into this as they hire young grads out of universities because they know a better measure of how successful one will be in his career is not his grade point average or his IQ or how much he volunteered . . . but rather his capacity to endure. So instead of raising our children to be eagles, maybe we should raise them to be camels, who will make it across the desert because they simply refuse to quit.

We've been talking about perseverance, but that's not really the point of the parable. Luke 18:1 "Jesus told them a parable to show them that they should always pray and not lose heart." Persistence in prayer is what this parable is about.

It's just a guess, but I suspect none of us prays as often as we know we should, probably because we're not confident it works. Each of us has been disappointed by how our prayers turned out. As a child we didn't get that birthday present. As an adult, we didn't get the healing or the relief, or the job, or the baby. Maybe there's even a little anger directed at God, because you prayed and prayed and prayed, sincerely, honestly, vigorously . . . and he didn't come through. You felt like your prayers were landing on deaf ears. What is a person to do when even prayer fails them? The answer of this parable is you keep praying. You don't throw in the towel. You keep going back. You persist. You nag and pester and you don't give up. The life of prayer is about the life of persistence. Maybe Paul was thinking of this widow when he told the church in Thessalonica, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Th. 5:17).

If God wants us to pray with such persistence, it must be good for us. Maybe it teaches us something

about patience and helps align our will with God's. Maybe it reminds us daily who we are and whose we are. Maybe to be declined again and again and again is not wasted effort, but it builds strength and character and grit. Maybe endurance teaches us something about faith, that you keep trusting in God even when you don't get from him what you think you need.

Your prayers don't need to be long and formal. You don't have to censor your prayers, or use complete sentences. Simply empty the contents of your hearts.

-Dear God, I'm afraid . . .

-Father it hurts . . . badly . . .

-Lord give him peace, your peace.

-Thank you God for the smell of cut hay.

-Father, bless my little granddaughter and keep her in your tender care.

Nor do your prayers need to be original. When the arrows are flying consider the prayer of St. Patrick's Breastplate: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me. Christ when I lie down. Christ when I arise."

And when you don't know what to do, what to say, where to go, then maybe just a simple "Lord, have mercy" will do.

And here's the promise of Scripture. Always, always, always the Lord will hear and answer your prayers and often, he will change things for you because of your prayers. Not everything is predetermined. Not everything is mapped out. If the Bible teaches us anything it teaches us the Lord intervenes in human history and personal history, and often he does so as his people pray. If an indifferent, selfish and unjust judge caves in before a poor widow's persistence, how much more will your loving Father answer your prayers and give you what you need?

So "Take it to the Lord in prayer," because there is one who hears your prayers and loves you, one who welcomes your hopes and aspirations, your fears and

anxieties, your confessions, and your gratitude. Claim the promise of this parable for yourself, that God is always there to hear and quick to answer your prayers.

Put your confidence in something that works. It is God who will keep you when all else has failed you; and it is to God to whom you can turn when you have exhausted all of the alternatives and (imagine this) even before you have tried the other alternatives. It is God on whom you can call when you get that fateful diagnosis. It is God to whom you can turn when you cannot even remember the last victory in your life. It is God who will see you through those seasons of doubt and despair, and it is God on whom you can depend as you draw your very last breath. The one to whom we turn in prayer is anything but like that heartless judge.

The old judge was arrogant. Our God is humble.

The judge was indifferent. Our God is compassionate.

The judge aloof. Our God very near, very accessible, very approachable.

The judge slow to listen. Our God always ready to hear from you.

The judge an iceberg. Our God your loving Father.

The judge unjust. Our God just and merciful and gracious in Jesus Christ.

So do not give up on prayer. Do not lose heart. Endurance is what you must have when you don't have anything else left. And when you don't have even that, you have a God who created and redeemed you, one who loves and forgives you and has planned a future for you.

If a cruel judge will give way to the unrelenting pressure of the widow, how much more will our gracious and loving Father listen to the prayers of his children! You are his redeemed children in Christ, and you belong through Holy Baptism. You *will* endure and live even as you die because sometimes the things you cannot see are more real than those things you can.

No one else will tell you this today or probably anytime this week, so listen carefully: Jesus ends the parable with these words: “And will not God vindicate his elect?” – that’s you – “who cry to him day and night?” It means will he not defend you and justify you and prove you innocent? You can bet your life he will! In truth, he already has! Amen.

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