

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 18:1-8

When I think of this parable, I can't help think of a story Tom Long tells about Mother Teresa. Back in the mid 80's Mother Teresa was starting a hospice for AIDS patients and she was out canvassing for donations. She made the rounds of the rich and the powerful in big American cities, asking them for support. One of which many of you know, Edward Bennett Williams, who was a wealthy, high-powered Washington lawyer. He had many famous clients including Richard Nixon, Frank Sinatra and Hugh Hefner. So he was a big shot. He was also wealthy. Wealthy enough that in the 80's he owned both the Baltimore Orioles and the Washington Redskins. This man was used to going toe to toe with the most powerful people in the world.

But now here comes Mother Teresa looking for money. All 4'10" of her. Williams did not want to give Mother Teresa any money. So before the old Nun got into his office he conferred with his right hand man Paul Dietrich, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, let's agree to be polite but firm. Let's say 'no.'" So they usher Mother Teresa into the office, they listen to her pitch and then they say, "Thank you Mother, we're touched by your appeal, but our answer is 'no.'" Mother Teresa smiled gently and said, 'Let us pray.' And she bowed her head and they all prayed. When the prayer was done, lo and behold, she launched into her appeal again! She asked Williams for money again using the exact same words. Again Williams, a little bewildered this time, said no. So Mother Teresa smiled gently and said, "Let us pray," and this time, Edgar Bennett Williams, the great Washington Lawyer threw up his hands and said in exasperation, "Oh all right!! Paul, get my checkbook," and he wrote a big fat check. Now that's a fundraising model they don't teach you in business school.

That's a little like Jesus' parable, isn't it? Jesus tells us about a big city judge who neither fears God nor cares much for people. He wears Armani suits, he drives around in a black Bentley with vanity plates, and most of his energy is spent networking with his powerful associates. He didn't go to law school to bring justice to the little guy. That's why he hasn't bothered to help this widow. Her neighbor has failed to pay the money he owes her, and she's looking for justice, but this judge won't even give her a court date. And why would he!? She's small potatoes. She didn't have any money, so there would be no bribes coming his way. She had no power so he couldn't gain any influence by helping her. There was nothing in it for him so he simply ignored her petition to come before him. But this was a feisty widow – Mother Teresa feisty. God bless the strong women of Luke. This feisty widow was determined to have her say before the judge one way or another. "If he won't see me in court, I'll make sure he sees me some other way!" she said to herself. And so she made a nuisance of herself. She showed up outside the courtroom, yelling at him, demanding a ruling. She left sticky notes on his office door! "Give me justice! Hear my case!" She called his office every day and left long, indignant messages. The final straw came when the judge was out on the golf course with the governor and the mayor, and she showed up. During his backswing on the first tee she yelled "justice!" he hooked his drive into the woods. His friends all laughed, he was embarrassed and he had a terrible round. When he got home that night he said: "I am so sick of this woman, I'm going to grant her justice just so I never have to see her nagging face again."

That's Jesus' story and moral of the story seems clear enough. Persistence pays off. Even for people who are not disposed to you, even for people who are not inclined to give you what you want, if you are persistent, they will respond. God is not like this judge, so persist in your prayers and he will hear you! He will not delay in giving you justice. He will do it quickly!

Sounds pretty clear, at first. But when you read closely things suddenly seem less straightforward. For example: We are called to persist in our prayers. What does it mean to be persistent? In what sort of situations is persistence called for? It's in situations where there's resistance right? Persistence assumes resistance. If we say this parable calls us to persist in our prayers, that implies there is some sort of force resisting our prayers. Anytime we persist it's because there is some sort of obstacle we have to overcome. So what's the obstacle?

Often we talk as if the resisting force is somewhere in heaven. Think of the metaphor that we sometimes use to describe persistent prayer: storming the gates of heaven. You've heard that one? 'Our church member is sick, but we're storming the gates of heaven on his behalf.' 'The Church in Egypt is under attack, but we are storming the gates of heaven for them.' It's something I've heard often to describe persistent prayer. But think about what it implies: it implies that heaven is some kind of fortress and the gate is closed. It almost sounds like God is somehow setting up battlements against our request. The gate of heaven is closed and we have to pound on it over and over again to get God's attention. Our prayers are like a battering ram that pounds at the gate until it gives way. Because we talk this way, when Jesus calls us to persist in our prayer we assume that he's saying: "Persist in your prayer, storm the gates of heaven, so that God will hear you, so that God will answer."

That's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus's is saying the opposite. There is no gate of heaven that our prayers have to break down like a battering ram. God is not like the unjust judge. The Lord is on our side. He is our Father we are his children. To use the metaphor of the passage, *we are his chosen ones*. He has chosen us, we are engraved on his hand, we are the apple of his eye and he will see to it that we will get justice and quickly. Jesus is very clear. When it comes to our prayers, there is no resistance coming from God's side. But then why do we need to persist in our prayers? If there is no resistance from God's side, if he will act without delay on behalf of his chosen ones, why do we need to persist in our prayer? Why doesn't Jesus say, "Hey, you are God's chosen ones, he's on your side, so you only need to ask once and He'll take care of it?"

Here's the teaching of this parable. It's not because of barriers on God's side that we need to persist in our prayer, it's for barriers in us. The resistance that requires persistence is in us. The obstacle that our prayers must overcome are human obstacles. Both the beginning and the end of our passage teaches that. Verse one says "Jesus told this parable so that we should always pray and not give up." So that WE would not give up. WE are the weak link in prayer. The danger is not that God will fail to hear; the danger is that we will give up. That's confirmed in the last verse in the passage, verse 8. After considering God's side in the prayer conversation, after telling us that God will act on behalf of his chosen ones without delay, Jesus turns back and points to us and says, "But what about you guys!?" "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Can you hear how that's the equivalent of Jesus' saying, "When the Son of man returns, will you still be praying? Or will you have given up." We are the weak link. The resistance that requires persistence is in us.

I don't want to be glib about this. From our perspective, it can sure feel like God is not listening. From our perspective it can sure feel like the barrier to prayer is on God's side. You've been praying for years for your marriage to improve, but it just keeps sputtering along. The same old arguments followed by the same waves of resentment, over and over and over again. You keep praying for God to free you from your depression. "Lord, give me stability!" And just when you think that maybe you're getting somewhere, here comes the dementor once again, sucking

the life out of us, the cold dark weight spreading through our spirit. You pray hopefully, fervently, for that loved one with cancer, but she keeps getting worse. This stuff happens, and when it does we think, “Well God’s not listening. This is pointless. I give up.” Jesus KNOWS we feel that way. He KNOWS that we feel like God’s not listening but Jesus is saying “no!” That’s what it feels like, but that’s not how it is. God hears and knows and God will act, but for your own sake, please don’t stop praying. Don’t stop talking to me and my Father! Don’t give up on this relationship! Don’t cut off this life line of your faith! Your Father is there and he cares. He is listening! Keep talking!

A model for this kind of prayer persistence might be Job. It’s entirely possible that when Jesus tells this parable, he’s thinking of Job. Why? Because Jesus isn’t the first one to compare God to an unjust judge. Job did it first. Job suffers enormous loss. Despite really trying to be a good man, he loses his family, he loses his house and he ends up on an ash heap. From that ash heap he shouts angry prayers. The first half of the book of Job is a record of those angry prayers. In those angry prayers Job accuses God of being an unjust judge. Read Job 9 and you’ll see it there. Or listen to this outburst: “*Know then that God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net around me. Even when I cry out, “Violence!” I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice.*” (19:7) I call out to the judge day after day, but he gives me no justice!!

Now, Job is wrong about God. As Jesus tells us in this parable, and as Job finds out at the end of the story, God is not an unjust judge. God sees Job, God cares about him, and God will act on his behalf. Job’s perceptions are clouded because he can’t see the big picture. But Job is right in this; throughout his struggle, Job never stops praying. He never stops talking to God. Even though his prayers are angry accusations and frustrated shouts, even though his prayers are sometimes like uppercuts aimed at God’s jaw, at least he never stops talking. He keeps his roots by the stream. Just keep praying, says Jesus. Even if all you can muster is an angry, “God this makes no sense!!” Even if your prayer is kind of wild swing at God’s jaw, keep talking to him. He *is* listening. He hears every groan, every tear, and every wail. So please, please, please, in the face of your own doubts, keep praying and do not give up.

Maybe you are saying to yourself, “OK Peter, I hear what you’re saying, but what about the other thing Jesus says in the parable? What about that promise of Jesus that he will not delay in bringing justice to his chosen ones? Jesus says we will get help quickly! That doesn’t fit my experience! I’ve waited and waited and waited. In what sense is this deliverance quick?!” Well remember where Jesus is when he delivers these words. He’s on his way to Jerusalem. He’s been on his way there for a while already. Way back in chapter 9 he set his face toward Jerusalem. He’s going there to die. For you. For me. He’s going there to lay down his life for all his chosen ones. He’s going there to lay down his life for all his chosen ones who cry to him night and day about injustice and poverty and hopelessness. He’s going there to lay down his life for the sake of all his chosen ones who cry to him day and night about their sicknesses, their sadness, their fears about their families, their worries about their children, and their loneliness. He’s going there to lay down his life so that we can know that none of this miserable junk can ever separate any of us from the love of God. He will do that all very soon, without delay. I don’t know about you, but when I consider the amount of love Jesus must have for me to make Him do such a thing, it’s more than enough to make me pray always, and not lose heart.