

“Godspell: The Parable of the Persistent Widow”
Luke 18:1-8

Today our focus is on the importance of persistence in doing good as one of the values of the kingdom of God. The best way to describe persistence in the way of Jesus is “tenacity in the face of the impossible.” As I mentioned before, parables were supposed to change the worldview of the listener. They were Jesus’ preferred way of teaching because they lowered people’s defenses and then helped them see things from a different point of view. Today’s parable is about the importance of perseverance, persistence, and tenacity.

Social researcher and writer Berne Brown talks about our struggle with persistence, especially when our tasks are difficult, because we are trained to expect things to be easy and to have quick fixes in life.

<https://youtu.be/JJo4qXbz4G4>

When things are tough or take a long time to fix, we may feel discouraged, but the spiritual work is to keep going even when our efforts seem to go nowhere. This was the message which Jesus was teaching the disciples as recorded in the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. This was the message which the author of Luke wanted to highlight to the Christian community a few generations after Jesus. This was the message of hope they needed to hear. The disciples and the Christian community to which the Gospel was written were struggling with an overwhelming sense of despair. The odds were so strong against them. Jesus seemed to be making many enemies along the way. The religious authorities were threatened by his message of love and justice. The Christian community of Luke was feeling the despair of being persecuted and misunderstood. The gospel was a costly addition to their lives. Against this backdrop we hear the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge, knowing the importance of persistent hope in the face of evil and pain.

What is especially important to hear about this parable in relationship to prayer is how God does not give up on us. This is not just about being optimistic in life and keeping a cheerful attitude in the face of calamity. It is about a deep and abiding hope that comes from the knowledge that God never gives up on us and that nothing is impossible with God. In this parable we often identify God with the unjust judge. Many interpretations of this parable would look at the unjust judge as the one granting justice because of the woman’s persistence. The lesson that is normally drawn out of this parable is that if we prayed hard enough before God for what we want, then God would eventually grant it. This understanding reduces our relationship with God to supply and demand. If we demand it hard enough, God will have to supply it. It is like a child pestering their parents hard enough to wear them down to get what they want. I believe that such interpretation misses the depth of the teachings of Jesus in this parable.

If we look closely at the parable it would be hard for us to identify God with the unjust judge, i.e., to identify God with someone who has no concern for justice! It is also difficult

to see God responding to a petition because of nagging without any concern for the content of the petition itself. Throughout the scriptures, in the Old Testament, we see God having a special concern for the widow and the orphan. God identifies with their suffering and their plight and demands that people take specific action to take care of the orphan and the widow because they were the most vulnerable in society. We also see how highly unusual for a woman, especially a widow with a male protector, to demand justice out of a judge in those days. A judge in those days was someone who knew the Torah Laws/the religious laws and would often use them to protect the interests of the religious leaders and the social elites of his people. This is a very radical scene of Jesus showing the disciples that persistence in faith and working for justice is the way of the kingdom. This kind of invitation is deeply rooted in God's own action with the people of Israel of never giving up on them even when they turned away from God's ways of love. Our persistence in faith, service and compassion does not come from any illusion that in our lifetime all the problems of the world would be solved. Our hope comes from knowing that the work of God's love never gives up on us and on our world. When we fail, we are still children of God. When our world fails, it is still God's beloved creation that is being redeemed. Our hope is not attached to results. It springs forth from a deep rootedness in the ways of God's love and justice and in how God always finds a way out of no way. Whether Jesus comes back tomorrow or in a thousand years, our hope is the same!

This kind of hope is a strong antidote to the despair we see so rampant in our world today. In her book, *Acedia & Me*, Kathleen Norris talks about the spiritual danger of getting too overwhelmed by the challenges of life and of our world. She writes about a spiritual danger called acedia, which is a monastic medieval term for apathy, boredom, or restlessness. She notes that, "When life becomes too challenging and engagement with others too demanding, acedia offers a kind of spiritual morphine: you know the pain is there, yet you can't rouse yourself to [do anything about it] . . . Caring is not passive, but an assertion that no matter how strained and messy our relationships can be, it is worth something to be present with others, doing our small part. Care is also required for the daily routines that acedia would have us suppress or deny as meaningless repetition or too much bother." Here is a clip for a presentation by Kathleen Norris about Acedia: https://youtu.be/KaRQle9a2_o . The remedy for Acedia is to examine our process of thinking to become aware of what is really going on inside of us. Godspell was supposed to help people become aware so that they could change their ways of thinking.

I want to highlight an example of persistence and faith for us today. His faith led him to take up causes that were very unpopular in his time. His fight against slavery took thirty years. But another aspect of his struggles to help society was his care about animals. This is often lesser known about him. Here is a clip of someone giving an overview of Wilberforce's example: <https://youtu.be/OD1qkIHUmHk>. I am sure there were many times when the struggle might have seemed overwhelming and hopeless, but what helped him was the persistence and tenacity of faith that come from an eternal source that never runs out. Once he knew he was loved beyond measure, he found his real purpose in life and nothing was going to deter him from that. His persistence came from God's persistence on loving him. That is how it works. The deeper we get into God's love, the deeper we get into loving all the things God loves.

Our prayer life is about keeping the eternal flame of God's love and purpose alive in our hearts to light our way. As writer Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it (slide), "Maybe prayer isn't the way in which we manipulate God but is simply the posture in which we finally become worn down by God's persistence -God's persistence in loving us. God's persistence in forgiving and being known. And God's persistence in being faithful and always, always, always bringing life out of death."

I would like us to end with a guided meditation about God's persistent love which often comes to us through the people of our lives who show us unconditional love and who believe in us. (adapted from Sharon Moon's work in *Returning to the Healing Oasis*). Take a few deep breaths and release any tension that you might be carrying. Center yourself and inhabit this present moment. Call to your mind's eye those whom you know and love and support you just as you are...those whose love is unconditional...They may be living here on earth or in God's eternal presence...Call them to your mind's eye and invite them to offer you their words of encouragement and strength for the journey. Allow them to pour out blessings and encouragements to you...Let it flow over your body, surrounding you... Let it move into your whole being with love and empowerment...Feel their strength moving through you...Feel their wisdom moving through you... Feel yourself surrounded by this affirmation...this deep connection with a cloud of witnesses... whole communion of those who love and support you...Know that you are not alone...Now remember that the Spirit of Life is with you offering you the courage and the power that you need at this time...Invite the Spirit to offer you any gift or wisdom that you might need for the struggle...Allow yourself to receive this....Know that this love is always with you, this spiritual strength and support is with you for your daily life...You are not alone. You are surrounded by God's persistent and loving presence. ...We give you thanks O God for the many manifestations of your love in our lives. Help us to find strength in them and to always find ways to remember the power of our connection to you and to one another, especially as we come in a few moments to give thanks for the lives of our loved ones who moved into your eternal presence this past year. Amen.