

**Sermon**  
**McCarter Presbyterian Church**  
**19th Sunday after Pentecost**  
October 20, 2019

**Old Testament Lesson**

Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-20

**NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon**

Luke 18:1-8

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

**Unjust Justice: Persistence Pays**

Sometimes we just feel **uneasy**. This is typical when we are taking up a new task. And, it can lead to a lot of conflicting **emotions**. This feeling of unease, mixed with excitement, reminded me of the medical student's first trip into the operating room. This is the time that the third-year students are allowed to "scrub in" and participate in surgery. There is a lot of anticipation with this. The day finally came: The students changed into their scrub suits, the clean uniforms specifically used in the operating room. The head nurse of the OR gave these wet-behind-the-ears medical students an orientation that ended with a ten-minute dissertation on how to wash their hands. It was essential in learning these hallowed rituals of sterile technique, a tradition that is now over 100 years old: It was called, "the 10-stroke method" of washing up.

With meticulous detail, this crack nurse administrator provided step-by-step instruction on cleaning each surface of all five digits, the palm, the back of the hand, the wrist, the forearm, and the elbow and above. One can imagine that performing this scrubbing four or five times each day, a significant layer of skin permanently departed from the fingers, thumb, hands, and forearms, producing a significant and persistent skin rash! With this time-honored routine accomplished and dripping wet, the students went into their assigned operating rooms where surgery teams were already underway. There, dried off with sterile towels. Then, expertly the technician by the table helped them into their sterile gowns and assisted them in putting on the sterile gloves.

With permission from the surgeons, the student was told to approach the table. The hands go immediately onto the drapes in the ever-so-sacred **Sterile Field**: the area set off by sterile

towels and drapes and loads of antiseptic iodine solution on the skin. No bacterium ever dares to get into the Sterile Field!

It was almost overwhelming for each student. It was scary and thrilling at the same time. After a lifetime of waiting, the students were in the OR with a real patient! The nervousness continued: After all, this brand new to the students. They are enthusiastic, but really they are out of their element, and they all know it. It is their inexperience with the requirements of the situation that gave them that **sense of unease**.

Well, there is a bit of unease when we finish reading this scripture. It is wonderful story, but something is **out of place** here. First of all, there is the **unjust judge**. If this man is so bad, why is he still holding the office? We struggle to think that a position of authority would be so compromised. We want to rationalize, thinking that this is some **oversight** or mistake. Surely, this would change. Some agency will intervene and remove the offensive judge from office. But, we get no hint of such a solution.

Secondly, many of us really don't care to hear people **complain**. My first impression of the widow is kind of negative. She may have had a solid claim, but she was **unrelenting**. In my legalistic mind, if she has been turned away, she must not have a very good case. Indeed, even the brief description of her actions is **irritating**. Or, perhaps, she is so persistent, about everything, that **no one** wants to be around her. Is she so outspoken, that she has lost **all support**, even of her friends?

Thirdly, perhaps she needed better **representation**: Where is local attorney asking us to dial them up and touting their names with images of birds and wrecking balls? A good attorney can make all the difference. But, we know that representation was not going to help anything. That was not the type of system in place in **Palestine** 2000 years ago.

Fourthly, in the end, **the widow gets her way**; but, is it for the **best reason**? In the parable, Jesus clearly states that through the sheer **annoying nature** of her constant plea, she has brought **justice** for her cause. What does that say about the **widow**? Or, about the **judge**? Or, even that particular **system** of justice. Is this the kind of institution that you and I want to support? Are things **this bad** in Palestine?

And, haven't we all wanted some sense of exacting **justice** for ourselves? Don't we long for someone to take up our cause or our individual case? We want a teacher or friend **to defend us** against a bully at school. Can we find a co-worker to join us in **confronting management** over unfair practices in our workplace? Or, are we upset over the injustice of cuts in our retirement plan, cutting back on benefits that were agreed upon 20 years ago?

With all of this going on, Jesus still called out for **large scale reform** with this story. **Widows and orphans** were to receive **special care**. This was clearly stated in our Old Testament lesson. The **Hebrew scriptures** make plenty of references to this topic, but in the time of Jesus, these ancient laws were being **ignored**. The *Book of Acts* (3, 4, and 5) describes members of the **new faith** that the apostles founded in Jerusalem taking care of many of these injustices among themselves after the death and resurrection of Jesus. They will work hard at **distributing** food and clothing **equally** among those who are the **most deserving**: widows, orphans, and the elderly. Of course, over time these problems have not gone away:

- **Single mothers** struggle to house and feed their children.
- The **elderly** live alone and barely interact with the community around them.
- **Vulnerable adults** struggle for heat and food.
- School-aged **children** have inadequate diets- barely enough protein intake to keep their bodies growing and their **mental development** progressing.
- **Displaced families** of all descriptions are without homes or adequate shelter. Those who have volunteered with the Interfaith Hospitality Network know this first-hand.

Well, some sense of **these injustices**- and the **unease** they produce- lie behind this message from Jesus, which is his intent in telling this story. If we look back through the Hebrew scriptures, we can see that **the people of God** have been given **justice** at long intervals, which is exactly what Jesus says in our scripture lesson. Hundreds of years before, they were systematically moved from Judah and Israel as **captives** to Babylon and Persia, and later they were **restored** to their homelands and allowed to **rebuild** the city of Jerusalem and the temple, as well. The account of these rebuilding efforts are contained in the books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* in our Old Testament. They are not terribly exciting to read, and rarely enter into a sermon. But, from them, we learn that **God is just and compassionate**. Jesus says so many times.

But, in this parable, it is more like a side **commentary**: something written in the margins. But, that is not how we experience **the Gospel**. This parable says nothing about salvation, after all. In fact, Jesus has another message here: **God** is still looking for **something else**, something **from us**; something unrelated to continued berating and **constant prayer**, although this lesson started with the subject of prayer.

Unmistakably, **prayers** need to **persist**. But, at the core of it all, Jesus tells us that we need to attend to our **faith**: Jesus tells us that our **faith matters**. The persistence in prayer only makes sense if we **believe** that God is **just**. This **persistence** of the widow only matters as part of **God's sovereignty**. God is **over everything**: even mean old judges and whining, carping plaintiffs in court. And, just as the judge wound up doing the **right thing**, even for less-than-noble reasons, he is still performing the **will of God**. After all, we have a **duty** to care for others. That is the subtle message in this rather uneasy, winding, somewhat perplexing story.

As we consider this story of **unjust justice**, we learn that **persistence pays**. In fact, I tried to think of some **alternate titles** that might round out this thought. Consider the possible headlines for this story:

**Pleading Persistent Protestations, Plaintiff Prevails!**

Or,

**Persistent Pleas Produce Powerful Pronouncement, Partly Primed in Prayer**

Despite my attempts at humor in manipulating these words, there is a lot going on **theologically** beneath the outward appearance of a **battle** between two strong-willed people. Despite one having a position of **authority**, which he abuses, and the other being virtually **powerless**, God's **justice** is accomplished, after all.

Indeed, Jesus is putting out another quick lesson with this parable. We want to take the side of the widow, but she seems really **annoying**. We want the judge to do right by this widow, but he does it for **unexpected** reasons. And, in the end, Jesus is hardly kind in his **message** to all of us. It is as if he would say, "Pray night and day- you **need to!**" And, that whole faith "thing"- It makes us think of that tiny **mustard seed** in another parable, doesn't it?

But, perhaps, the **unstated** is the real message. We have **God with us**. Even when we are **alone**: In seeking justice before a judge, **God hears us** and has **compassion** for us. And, things move **slowly**. I'm sorry, but they do. Just ask someone working for **reform** to reverse the death penalty; or, those who worked so hard for **desegregation** in the 1950's and -60's, as many of you did.

Regardless, God continues to **call us**, shape us, **mold us**. We hit the "wall," sometimes literally, but then we look at the situation in a **new way**. When this happens through our **faith**, this spiritual and religious **filter** can produce a **transforming** experience.

In our scripture lesson, Jesus seems to be saying,

"Keep on prayin', People. God is listening."

Indeed, God **hears us**. God loves us and **cherishes** each one of us. And, with our faith in God as Ruler of All, you and I can make it through **one more day**. And, having made it, there is time for much needed **change** in our own **attitudes, judgements, and prejudices**.

Yes, God does love us. Jesus says to keep up our faith and to **pray**. Because, praying **changes us** in the very act of praying: **increasing our faith** and turning our attention away from ourselves to the **wants and the needs of others**. This is the **call of Christ** to the church- and for God's work in **the kingdom**.