

Nagging for Justice

There is a picture of Jesus laughing that has been around for a while, and yet when we think about Jesus, we don't often think about Jesus being funny, do we. Today's parable might be some of his most comedic material. In this story, unique to the gospel of Luke, it's not hard to imagine Jesus teaching, with a crowd gathered around him, chuckling at this ridiculous reversal story.

A woman pounds and pounds on the door of a rotten and corrupt government official, who would care less about her problems, until finally, when he can't take the constant knocking, he sticks his head out and says, "Alright, alright, already! Knock it off! I'll give you whatever you want if you just leave me alone!"

The crowd laughs, because, of course, they all know this woman. She's the picture of the person who always seems to have a storm cloud hovering over her, ready to rain on her at any minute. She always gets a raw deal – because she has nothing – no husband, no family, no money, no security, no power or social standing in that culture. They know her and they pity her.

They know this judge, too, the one who is only out for himself. He is no public servant, so they laugh at the idea of one of their own, this poor, powerless, pitiable woman, pestering and annoying this sleazy guy who everyone loves to hate, until, finally, finally, he does something good in spite of himself.

It's a story that's sort of perfect for sight comedy, right? You could see it playing equally well on the opera stage, or Sesame Street, with Oscar the Grouch playing the part of the cranky official.

As is often the case, you sort of lose the zing of the joke, in the translation from the original greek to modern English.

In verse 5 it says "Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming. The Greek word translated to "wear me out" is hypo-piazō which is a boxing term which literally means to hit under the eye, leaving a bruise. As a metaphor it means to be an unbearable annoyance. The judge is so anxious about the widow's persistence that he compares her agitation to being given a black eye. This is a powerful metaphor to use to describe the trouble this widow was causing for the judge.

The New International Version interprets this Greek word much more literally than most translations, reading "so that she won't eventually come and attack me!" The Message translation follows the NIV by going into even further amusing detail, reading "otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black and blue by her pounding."

What is certainly clear is that this judge is fearful for what will happen to his life and his reputation if he continues to ignore the widow's pleas for justice. And most importantly, it's the fear of further agitation that makes him grant the widow justice. Commentator Bernard Brandon Scott points out that the "great irony is that the judge who neither fears God nor respects man comes to fear a widow, the weakest member of society."

When English translations do not capture the meaning of this verb, they soften the tenacity of the widow's actions, as well as her perceived status as a "trouble maker" to the system.

Now, I don't condone actual violence, but you can almost see the crowd chuckling at imagining this poor widow giving the unjust judge a black eye, and then him, going into the office the next day, and having to explain how he got it and who he got it from! You can imagine the crowd laugh, and then sigh....and then remember that even Jesus' jokes have a point. And they remember that this is what Jesus said prayer is like.

Yes, this parable, this story that talks its way around the topic to come back to the point – is told in the context of other parables on the theme of prayer...and holding on to our faith...and the long awaiting arrival of the realm of God on earth. To understand this parable in context, it's helpful to begin, in fact, at the end with verse 8 where it says, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" That is a much bigger question! Yet, that is the context in which Jesus tells this story. That is his point! Will we, like the widow, keep knocking on the door, keep pestering the powerful for justice, keep on, working and praying, for God's justice and peace to rule and reign in this world.

But that's not often how this parable is interpreted today. Editors of our Bibles sometimes title it alternatively the "Unjust Judge" or the "Persistent Widow." More often we tend to simplify this story to the importance of continuing on in prayer. I argue it is about that, but not only about that. The meaning you derive from this parable depends on who you focus on in the story. In that way, it can become something of a choose-your-own-ending story.

If you focus on the unjust judge – you might come away with the idea that, with enough petition, even the most amoral person, has an incentive to answer the nagging pleas of the oppressed and powerless. So keep calling! Keep writing letters! Keep signing those petitions!

If you go down the other path, and focus on the widow – a symbolic "stand-in" for one of several historically marginalized groups – children, immigrants, poor, sick, any "other" – then the take away is quite different.

Then the takeaway seems to be that we need to be persistent in prayer. That it's our job to keep coming to God with our prayers, until they are answered, because God is infinitely more willing and able to answer, than the reluctant and unjust official in the story. You might even see this story as a call to persistence in resistance towards injustice. You might see in this story, an exhortation to, metaphorically-speaking, give the unjust judges of our day, a "black eye."

To pester, embarrass, pressure and demand, that they make whatever is wrong – right. That's why Ded and Flora RRanxburgaj aren't living in the apartment at the church any more. Because we nagged and we nagged. We embarrassed ICE with their horrific treatment of the family. We walked to Lansing, we wrote and we wrote and we wrote letters, we met with Senators. The lawyers did their job too, and the ACLU took up the case. So much so the case was settled just when it was going to go before the Supreme Court of the United States of America.

We know how to organize, to get petitions signed, to call our elected officials, to organize rallies and vigils. And all that gets tiring. And we grow weary. And sometimes we wonder if we are making any difference at all. The truth is there are many, who wait patiently for justice, healing and help. Many who wait patiently.

Sometimes it feels like what we are doing really matters. Sometimes it feels like it doesn't make much of a difference at all. Like we are doing our part to pester and pressure with no effect. At times like these, I think we would do well to look not at the immediate results of every small action or effort for change, to paraphrase, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, look for the "long arc of history bending toward justice."

It's the same with some of our personal prayers. When I pray for those experiencing homelessness, sometimes it feels like an overwhelming challenge with no answer. Sometimes it feels like, for all our efforts, nothing is improving, nothing is changing. We need to remind ourselves of the power of persistence. We've seen and heard stories of persistent women, right? Just recently, after Mahsa Amini was beaten to death in Iranian custody, hundreds of women in Iran rose up and began cutting their hair and burning their hijabs. They literally were standing up to the morality police, nagging and nagging for their rights.

I hear a lot of stories of deeply faithful, prayerful people, who have persisted through great trials. Health challenges, mental illness, joblessness, difficulties in their relationships, a crisis of faith. They have prayed persistently and their prayers aren't always answered.

Steve Martin once starred in a movie called "Leap of Faith" where he played the role of this faith healer who rolls into a small town, hoping to clean up and there's this boy who can't walk – who asks to be healed, believes this preacher can heal him and he prays and prays and prays and isn't healed. And it devastates him.

Have you ever been in a place like that? Wondered, "God, if you're so just, if you're so powerful, if you're so loving? Why don't you answer my prayers?"

What hope does Jesus offer? He says, "God is nothing like the unjust judge in this story." God promises even speedier relief. God promises to be attentive to our cries. One of my favorite scriptures is Galatians 6:9 that says, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."

The persistent prayer and prayerful persistence that Jesus is illustrating is a type of prayer that goes beyond words and rituals. Prayer means to be moved as God is moved, desiring justice as God desires justice. We look to God for a solution, and God looks to us for one, depending on one another. God responds to us by calling out to us, as we call out to God.

It's through our tears, our rage, our laughter, our passion and all sorts of affection that we pray. These types of prayers are a blessing when we're exhausted and all out of words.

Throughout the past, Christian mystics have talked about the gift of tears, which come "when the inner fire is intense. That's what Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila explained and "the heart, no matter how hard distills like an alembic.

These tears are a gift from God when they come without our effort. To weep while we pray is to experience the heart of God, whose Spirit as it says in Romans intercedes with groaning too deep for words. In the face of growing indifference, the gift of tears is needed more than ever.

The purpose of these tears isn't just to lay our emotions bare, but to move us to persistent action. Teresa also cautions her students, saying "not everything is accomplished through just weeping but set our hands to the task of hard work and virtue." She encourages them to "let the tears come when God sends them" and to let these tears "irrigate this dry earth" and produce fruit. The tears that soften our hearts can console us but they can also empower us.

Maybe Jesus' instruction to "pray always" and "not lose hope" isn't giving us a first and second task, but rather it was Jesus' way of showing us that it is through prayer that we learn to not lose hope. It's through being moved, as God is moved, and responding to that affection that we cultivate hope. What would our prayers look like if we prayed like this? What would our spiritual communities look like if we prayed together like this?

Jesus tells the disciples this parable after teaching them about the imminent kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is emerging, like a mustard seed into a tree; like yeast into bread, growing from within us. Jesus didn't teach that prayer is what brings the kingdom of God, through the hands of a higher being. Rather, the kingdom of God is always to come, as we build a better world, and what prayer does is keep our hope alive.

I don't know what you are waiting for this morning, what you've been nagging God for in prayer...I don't know what weariness you are feeling in your own struggle but God knows. God sees you.

Our family did the 5k walk for the Detroit Riverwalk a couple of months ago. I walked of course, but tried to walk fast through it so I wasn't the last person across the finish line. There were people along the route cheering us on. Yelling things like You can do it! And don't give up!

That is my prayer for you, my friends. Don't give up. Tell others, Don't give up because God tells us "don't give up."

Pray always, don't lose hope. Pray with your community because prayers especially persist in community, as we call out to God for ourselves and for each other. Amen.