

“Perseverance”

Pledge Dedication Sunday - October 19, 2025

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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 accuser.’ 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?”

Luke 18:1-8

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of all of our hearts
Be acceptable in thy sight
O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.
Amen

Once again, context is everything. Immediately before our passage for this morning, we read: “Then [Jesus] said to the disciples, ‘The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Humanity, and you will not see it.’”

This is our context: the days when you seek justice and it is nowhere to be found—the days when the temptation to despair is upon you. “Then” in THOSE days, “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”

Notice how prayer is portrayed as concurrent with the need to be encouraged, to be emboldened, to be empowered. Jesus seems to be saying that prayer is the power and means by which despair can be overcome.

Well, that’s all well and good, but it just begs the question of what prayer looks like. Is it sitting with hands folded and heads bowed in humility? Kneeling in silent supplication? Well, sometimes. But it sure doesn’t look like that in our parable for today.

“In that city there was a widow who kept coming to [the unjust judge] and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my accuser.’ 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.’” Now, translations are always decisions, and clearly the translators of the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition made a decision here to

clean things up a bit and make them a little more proper. A closer translation would be “so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.”

This is not a meek and mild widow, she is fierce in her determination, so fierce that the unjust judge is afraid—or at least pretends to be—of getting a black eye. The point to be made here is that prayer, in the context of justice, is not a spectator sport—it is not demure, meek, or polite—it is in your face, loud, and at times irritating. There is even an element of comedy here, with the judge afraid of this “little old lady from Pasadena.” Indeed, the original audience, undoubtedly would have laughed at Jesus’ parable. They would have laughed at the unjust judge—indeed nothing deflates the powerful more than laughter.

Perhaps the larger point, given the context of a Roman-occupied Palestine, is that prayer can be a form of protest—or perhaps better, protest can be a form of prayer—prayer not always hidden away in the home, as Jesus counsels elsewhere, but sometimes in the streets, loudly accosting public officials. Again, context is everything.

But there is something else going on here as well. I think it’s important to note that the reason the widow seeks justice is not so much because she has been a victim of exploitation—which would have been expected, indeed the trope of the exploited widow was common in first century Palestine—but rather because she has been herself falsely accused. “Grant me justice against my accuser,” she says. We aren’t given details, presumably because they aren’t important—but what IS important is the detail that she has been unjustly characterized. Far from a victim, she has been accused of being some sort of perpetrator. The fact that the judge is quote unquote afraid of her completes the humorous image of this sweet little old lady as a thug with a wicked right hook.

However, in our own time, it is hard NOT to think here of the fanciful descriptions of places like Portland as being fire-ravaged war zones, with roving mobs raping and looting indiscriminately—even though no one on the ground seems to be able to find any evidence of this. Similarly, it’s hard not to think of how all immigrants seem to be portrayed by the powers that be as members of violent gangs, when we know that immigrants commit crimes at far lower rates than natural born citizens. Again, given the context of Roman-occupied Palestine, perhaps beneath the laughter is also a deep sadness about being reduced and defined unjustly by the powerful. This is a woman who is simply seeking justice—and she is turned into a cartoon villain by the judge in order to justify the violence of his own oppression of the vulnerable—even when he knows better. “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone....” he says.

But this widow, this woman with little power in this society, simply refuses to be reduced to the agenda of either her false accusers or the unjust judge. She will have justice. The fact that Jesus likens prayer to a refusal to be defined by the powers that be—a refusal to be erased, over-written, disappeared—a refusal to give up—suggests that standing up, defining yourself, seizing your agency are all antidotes to despair—even if there is no immediate result.

Indeed, standing up for justice is a long term project. Who knows how long she had to pester the judge? Justice doesn’t come overnight. It may not even come in our lifetimes. It demands patience, persistence, perseverance. But it will come. It will surely come on that great and glorious day. In the meantime, it is the standing up, itself, regardless of immediate results, that is the antidote to despair. What matters when we can no longer see any cause for hope—is action—taking the leap of faith. Indeed, action manifests, produces hope—and hope kills despair.

But we are not alone in this. “The kingdom of God is among you,” Jesus says in the passage preceding our own. The “you” is plural. We carry the kingdom with us, in our collective action—in our communal hope. In our refusal to give in. In our refusal to be divided. In the simple joy of communal resistance.

Friends, today is Dedication Sunday when we bring forth our pledges—of whatever amount—and dedicate them to the pursuit of the Kingdom of God. And I submit to you that these are also days when we long to see one of the days of the Son of Humanity—and yet, can’t always see it. These are days of exhaustion, of discouragement—and yet these are also days of action, perseverance—and prayer. These pledges are not only pledges to maintain the building, support our ministries, provide for the staff and administration—these are not only pledges to buy flowers, buy new music, help feed the hungry—though they are all these things and more—they are also prayers as protest—positive, creative action, down payments on the future—agitation against the forces that would distort and pervert the very idea of the common good—the very idea that we are meant to care for one another—and not just people who look and think like us. These pledges witness to the truth that all are created equal in God’s love, that basic common human decency matters, that building group identity by persecuting the other is anathema to the gospel. They are pledges of trust in the promise—blows against the empire and ceaseless disturbances of the unjust judges of our own time.

Let us not contain our prayers within the four walls of our glorious sanctuary—but let us take our prayers of protest to the streets. Let us go public. Let us make some noise. Let us go tell it on the mountain that the day will surely come when there will be no more families ripped apart, children placed in handcuffs, asylum-seeking refugees sent back without due process to places they have fled in fear of their lives, or sent to third countries where they might be tortured, all for the crime of speaking Spanish, wearing tattoos, and having the wrong color of skin. This is not about partisan politics, this is not about republicans, democrats or independents—people of good will can and will disagree about details—but this IS about basic common decency, this is about common public morality, this is about right and wrong.

Let us take our pledges, our prayers and our protest out into the public square that all might know that there is a beacon of hope in Harrisburg, a beacon of hope wherever two or three are gathered in the name of love—that the light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Hear the Good News: There is no king but Jesus and he rules by serving all. Amen.