

A priest at a parochial school was teaching about the proper behavior for church. He was asking the children what rules that their parents might give before taking them to a nice restaurant. 'Don't play with your food,' one second grader cited. "Don't be loud," said another, and so on.... The priest turned to one little boy who had not said anything and asked "And what rule do your parents give you before you go out to eat?" Without batting an eye, the child replied, "Order something cheap."

First, some background on the gospel. Luke tells us the point of the parable before he tells us the parable. Generally, this is not considered a good move. It prejudices the listeners because we already know the message before we hear it, which means we are less likely to pay attention. But in this case, the prelude is a plus. It does not give the story away in any significant way. Rather, it lets us know how many layers it contains. Knowing the parable is about the connection between praying always to God and not losing heart when it comes to wearing down injustice points us to the spiritual grounding of the quest for justice. Without it, we might interpret the parable in a less than accurate way. We might reduce it to a simple lesson on perseverance in prayer, or it would be an encouragement on working against injustice. The introduction tells us it is both.

Remember that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, the place of His crucifixion and death -- and in the previous chapter He was going through the region of Samaria. The people of the countryside know the stories about cities. They see cities as impersonal places where hard and cynical people take advantage of the weak. So this city judge is immediately recognized. Appealing to his better side is a waste of time. He doesn't have one. He does not fear God and so no appeal to law or covenant or divine compassion will move him. He does not respect people and so no appeal to human need or decency will have any effect. He is an unmovable object.

But there is also an irresistible force -- a widow who is not put off by his putting her off. She cannot count on his adherence to the covenant command to care for the widow and the orphan to help her. Nor can she lay before him the extent of her need. She has only one thing on her side: she is asking for justice and he, being a judge, is supposed to give it to her. But the odds are not in her favor. The Hebrew word for widow means 'one who has no voice.' Yet her voice is all she has. Her only hope is that she keeps coming. Persistence is not her fallback strategy. It is her only strategy.

At first the judge is unmoved. How could perseverance be advocated if the judge relented immediately? His initial refusal highlights the widow's insistence. Instead of losing heart, she perseveres. Eventually, the judge caves. We are not left in doubt about why. We eavesdrop on his inner monologue, a favorite literary technique of Luke. The judge repeats the description of the storyteller about himself and so reinforces the reason he is 'granting justice.' It is not because he fears God or respects people. It is because the continual coming of the woman is wearing down his resistance. The justice that should be given because he is a judge is only given because the widow is relentless.

However, more than sheer nagging may be at work. Our translation says this 'widow keeps bothering me....lest she come and strike me. Scholars say this is literally translated, 'give me a black eye.' 'Giving a black eye' is an image for tarnishing a reputation. A judge is supposed to give justice and he does not want to be known for not giving justice. This woman's persistence will show him up as an unjust judge. He does not want this. He wants the pretense of justice on the outside even though he is not committed to justice on the inside. He wants to be known as just. This hypocrisy is a key piece of information. And remember this is an honor-shame based culture. He does not want to be shamed by this woman.

Second, then Jesus takes over and guides the reflection. Of all the things the Lord could point to in the story, He wants us to listen to the inner monologue of the unjust judge. When we listen to what the unjust judge is saying to himself, we learn one important thing: he can be had. His self-understanding is the that he is vulnerable to being exposed for who he is. This is what he most fears and what eventually will drive him to give justice. The relentless widow unmasks injustice until justice is given, even if it is given only reluctantly.

But how are the hearts of widows sustained during this relentless effort? If they pray 'day and night,' the just God will not 'long delay but act quickly' and pour into their hearts divine justice. This is what the just God wants to do, and their knowledge of this divine passion assists them in remaining open in prayer. God suffuses the hearts of those who pray with justice, and then with empowered hearts they bring justice into the affairs of earth. God does not intervene as a separate agent of activity and bring a justice to the human world that humans themselves cannot bring.

Still, the perseverance to transform the earth is difficult to sustain. Injustice is both an individual habit and an ingrained social structure. It is difficult to wear down something that is so pervasive. It may be exposed and overcome here and there, but it is never unmasked everywhere at once. So the effort is endless, and it leads to the question of endurance. When the Son of Man comes, whose passion is the transformation of the earth, will He find the energy of the God-grounded widows unabated – or will the opposite of the parable have happened? Will the resistance of those who fear not God and respect not humankind have worn down the widows? Only those who hear this passage and take it seriously have the answer.

Third, this then is more than a teaching about perseverance in prayer – God will cave in under pressure! But this parable is struggling to keep 2 things together – personal spirituality and social justice – which are 2 sides of the same coin. Praying to God is for the purpose of effecting social justice. God answers the cry for justice by giving justice into the hearts of the ones who cry. In this way the ones who pray will endure because they will be grounded in God. Martin Luther King, jr. was a minister, and deeply grounded in prayer. He knew that "the arc of the universe is long, but it always bends toward justice." His prayer sustained him in his work for justice because it strengthened his faith that God was with him.

"Always praying" means the channel between God and the human person remains open. Divine energy will not periodically spurt and then dry up. Rather, it will be a steady, empowering flow. Therefore, the ultimate source of the energy that wears down injustice will be coming from the ONE GOD who is the source of the passion for justice.

"Praying always" is only possible if the ones praying are widows. As a literary character, the widow in herself is a powerless figure. She has no resources of her own to rely on. If she manages to wear down a hard-as-nails judge, we know that she has had help. When the powerless who seek justice take down the powerful who refuse to give it, a careful investigation will uncover the hidden agency of God. The energy of wearing down is mediated through the widow, but it does not originate with her. It is the result of her communion with God made possible by her continual praying.

This combination of praying always and not losing heart is further developed later in this gospel in the scene of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane. (Lk 22:33-53). The injunction, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial," bookends that episode. In the Garden, Jesus stays awake in prayer, but the disciples fall asleep. As Jesus prays, an angel visits Him and takes on the role of a masseuse, strengthening Him for the upcoming contest until His sweat becomes as "drops of blood falling to the ground." This praying is necessary for Jesus to persevere in the mission He has been given.

When the crowd comes to take Jesus away, the disciples, who have not prayed, resort to violence. They cut off the ear of the slave of the high priest. But Jesus, who has prayed, restores the ear. The disciples have yielded to temptation and become as violent as the men who have come to arrest Jesus. But Jesus has not yielded to this temptation and continues to reconcile enemies. The key is that Jesus prayed always, allowing God's peace to fill His heart and inform His actions.

This is a significant addition to the "how we are to pray always and not lose heart." Not to lose heart means more than merely persevering in the face of difficulties. It is more than not giving up. It is coming forward with love and being faithful to the ways of peace. The temptation in wearing down injustice is to become more unjust than what we are attempting to wear down. We win on the terms the unjust judge sets. We fear God less and respect people less than he does, and so we can overcome him with more violence than he is able to muster. However, we can resist this temptation when we integrate our hearts into the heart of Jesus. He is the relentless widow who prays always until His heart becomes the heart of God, a sacred heart, a merciful and just heart, a heart overflowing with love. Amen. (taken from THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, John Shea, with some adaptations, p. 289-293)