Luke 18:1-18

October 19, 2025

Pray

I’d like to think I know something about persistence. For most my mornings start like this, “please put your shoes on.” “Shoes on” Shoes on now. What do you mean you want to put them on in the car? Fine. Coats, we need our coats, please put your coat on. Where is your coat? I am a big believer in pick and choose your battles and embracing natural consequences. So as we walk to the car, my daughter in her socks with no coat on is insisting she is not cold. In that moment I realize I know persistence, perseverance, and their cousin stubbornness. What I am left to question…I might know Persistence but do I have it?

You don’t have to a toddler or child in your life to cause you to question your own tenacity or resolve. I have had plenty of conversations over the last year where the state of the world, the reality of the American political landscape, folks’ own battles with mental and physical health, or challenging financial struggles, has caused us to wonder if we have the persistence to confront that which we wish to see transformed.

Dear Church, my confession is that I really struggle with today’s Gospel reading. The message seems to be, just be persistent and God will grant justice. Keep poking God like a child that won’t take no for an answer and then God, like the judge, will give in out of annoyance. But how often have we seen justice treated like a Rasin in the sun, a dream differed. How many have fought for freedom and never tasted it? I fear that for those facing hard challenges, those who have prayed at hospital bedsides might read this story and be left wondering did I not pray persistently enough? But this parable is about more than just prayer for Jesus says, will God not grant Justice?

If we are talking about justice then I wrestle with this text because the widow should never have been alone. The prophet Isaiah writes, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” Just one of many times scripture implores people of faith to protect and advocate for widows. God’s word often has a theme of defending the least, the last, and the lost. In the Ancient world there were no life insurance policies, no social security, probably no employment for a widow, so if a woman’s fathers’ family wouldn’t take her back in, she faced extreme poverty. However, in the story Jesus makes clear the judge wouldn’t have cared about Isaiah or any of the commands to care for the poor. I find this passage challenging because the unjust judge feels all too familiar. We know too many leaders or people in power whose only concern is self. Yet, if we really grapple and look within we just might be aware of the moments we are like the unjust judge indifferent to the pleas and cries of our neighbors. Who are the widows crying for justice that we neglect to stand with?

Just to muddy the waters a little bit more, this Parable is about more than prayer, and more than Justice for Jesus ends it wondering if when he returns will he find faith on earth?

Persistent prayer, fighting for justice, and holding fast to faith, these themes make me think of Mamie Till and her son Emmit Till. In 1955 Emmett Till was visiting with family in Mississippi. He was only 14 years old, when after shopping at a country grocery store the white owner operator Carolyn Bryant accused him of acting inappropriately. Now her story has changed over the years but usually revolves around Emmit whistling. There is no debate about what happened four days later. Carolyns husband Roy and his brother J.W. Milam, abducted, tortured, and then shot Emmett, dumping his body into the river. When Emmett’s badly mutilated body was found his mother said, “Let them see what they did to my boy” and she elected to have an open casket. Over a 100,000 came out to see Emmett and his death galvanized the civil rights movement and helped highlight the horrors of the Jim Crow South. Roy and JW were acquitted by an all-white jury and then protected by double jeopardy sold their story for $4,000 confessing to Emmett’s lynching.

In her autobiography Mamie Till wrote this, “We must teach our children to weather the hurricanes of life, pick up the pieces and rebuild. We must impress upon our children that even when trouble rise to seven-point-one on life’s Richter scale, they must be anchored so deeply that, though they sway, they will not topple.” Mamie Till began a lifetime of advocacy which helped to achieve the Emmet Till Anti Lynching bill signed into law in 2022. At the bills signing Emmet would have been 82. A reminder that so many of our neighbors are still fighting for justice.

As people of faith we seek to serve God and Neighbor not merely through acts of mercy like having a food pantry but by asking the systemic Justice questions like why are our neighbors struggling to make ends meet in the first place? Our ministry as disciples must be grounded in prayer. For prayer is communication with God, an activity that strengthens and changes us. Mamie Till, the persistent widow, show us what is possible when one is anchored deeply in faith. They point us to God, a parent who also knows the pain of losing a Son. Jesus who showed God’s justice not with vengeance but through ministry to the least, death on a cross, and victory of the empty tomb. We are forever connected to Christ life, death, resurrection, to his insistence and persistence of love, grace, and mercy. This connection, relationship, happens as a gift in the waters of Baptism. So that when we, when Samuel might feel as though we don’t have what it takes, when we question our worthiness, question our ability to persist, when troubles rise to 7.1’s on life’s Richter scales, we might always know we are loved, we belong, we are held by God. Thanks be to God for persistent women who have shown us God’s persistent Grace. Amen.