

Persisting for the Children  
October 13, 2013  
Luke 18:1-8

I want to begin in an interactive manner. Most of you have heard hundreds if not thousands of sermons. You know what God is like. Let me ask for your help in understanding some of the best attributes you associate with God.

God is or God is like what? Go ahead. Don't be shy. Share your answers.

*(receive and repeat words from the congregation)*

With these words in mind we prepare to hear the first eight verses of the eighteenth chapter of Luke. These verses contain one of the more challenging parables Jesus told. David Lose, a professor of preaching at Luther Seminary, sees it as "ambiguous as it is provocative."<sup>1</sup> Most believe this parable includes imagery for God that is unfamiliar to most: God as being in some way like an unjust judge.

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?"

May God bless the reading and hearing of these difficult words attributed to Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose. "Commentary on Luke 18:1-8."

<[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=810](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=810)>

Let us pray. God of Many Names, you are always larger than the boxes we place you in or the labels we prefer to use to explain your identity. Help us to see that you are just, and that you value those who are persistent in seeking justice. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

By now many of you are learning that I am all about Jesus. Over the last decade or so, I have given more thought to Jesus' parables, prayers, and priorities than to any other religious topic.

Today these three come together in a single reading. Depending on your perspective, you may focus on either of the two dominant characters.

You could see this as a story about a damnable judge and a distressed widow. You could label it as the Parable of the Unjust Judge or the Parable of the Persistent Widow. While both sides are worthy of consideration, our focus this morning will be on the persistence of the widow, and on her role in reminding us that we are called to persist.

Since none of us lived in biblical times, it is often difficult to imagine what the world was like. When we read the Bible, we often unknowingly read our 20th or 21st century worldviews and assumptions into the passages we ponder.

Knowing this and recognizing the power of parable, I was thrilled when I came across a well done video series that retells many of Jesus parables in ways that communicate the message that make sense in our modern world. Unlike most productions that simply update the language or scenery, this one seeks to take the big idea of the original parable and then create something new for a contemporary audience.

The retelling of the Parable of the Persistent Widow is set in the late 1960s or early 1970s, and filmed in black and white. It vividly portrays a prejudiced and corrupt judge who simply refuses to hear the case of a poor black widow. He is happy to pretend she doesn't exist. He wants nothing to do with her or with her case.

Rather than accept this, she does everything she can to be heard. Despite numerous obstacles, she persists. She is always around. She is determined to have her day in court.

Her resolve is unwavering. Day after day, she presses on. Eventually she wears down the judge, and receives the justice she has been seeking.<sup>2</sup>

In both the modern retelling and the original parable, you can't miss the huge power difference between the judge and the widow. The widow has limited resources, limited mobility, and limited options. The judge is supposed to play by the rules but has decided he is above them.

The persistence of the marginalized widow is appealing. It is an admirable quality that resonates with readers and viewers alike. They want what she wants. We want what she wants. We all crave justice.

We want to be on the side of justice! We believe our God is just. We know that we are called to help make our world a more just realm.

There are so many ways we might endeavor to achieve this. Today, we focus our persistence on one of Jesus' priorities: children are precious.

Lets return to the biblical text of the eighteenth chapter of Luke. The first eight verses are our parable: the Parable of the Persistent Widow -- the one who persists and prevails because of prayer. It is followed by another parable about prayer. Then, after these parables, Jesus reminds us how important children are in his eyes.

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."<sup>3</sup>

Every week we gather here and say together or sing together the Lord's prayer. We ask that God's kingdom come; we commit ourselves to work to make it so on earth as it already is in heaven. If God's realm is to expand, children must be valued.

We must be inspired by the widow's boldness. We must seek to understand the challenges facing this generation of children, and be willing to persist in prayer and advocacy on their behalf.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Widow & Judge" in *Modern Parables: Living in the Kingdom of God, Vol. 1* (Compass Cinema, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Luke 18:15-16, NRSV.

The scope of the problem is staggering. Children experience injustice globally, nationally, and here in our community.

On the global level, injustice is pervasive!

- 1 billion children are deprived of one or more services essential to survival and development, and
- Over 100 million children who are of age to attend primary school are not receiving an education.<sup>4</sup>

On the national level, here in the United States, we have the second highest child poverty rate among the world's richest 35 nations<sup>5</sup>. In our country 22% of all children live in poor families, and that number grows to 45% when low-income families are included<sup>6</sup>

On the local level, right here in what many think of as a wealthy place, injustice is all too real. In Collier County alone,

- over 5,000 children live in poverty.<sup>7</sup>
- Nearly 4 out of every 10 children (37%) are in households receiving food stamps,<sup>8</sup> and
- more than 6 of every 10 school children (62%) are eligible for free or reduced cost lunch based on their family's limited household income.<sup>9</sup>

While statistics present an accurate account of the challenging conditions facing many children, they tend to be an easy way to keep the matter at arm's length from our own experience. We must get closer to the children. Rather than allowing our friends and family to offer us safe shelter in a different world, we must enter the world of these children.

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<sup>4</sup> UNICEF. "The State of the World's Children - Special Edition: Celebrating 20 Years of the Rights of the Child," p4. <[http://www.childinfo.org/files/SOWC\\_SpecEd\\_CRC\\_ExecutiveSummary\\_EN\\_091009.pdf](http://www.childinfo.org/files/SOWC_SpecEd_CRC_ExecutiveSummary_EN_091009.pdf)>

<sup>5</sup> Valerie Strauss. "The Cost of Child Poverty: \$500 Billion a Year." <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/07/25/the-cost-of-child-poverty-500-billion-a-year/>>

<sup>6</sup> Sophia Addy, Will Englehart, and Curtis Skinner. "Basic Facts About Low Income Children." <[http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_1074.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1074.html)>

<sup>7</sup> "2011-2012 School District of Collier County - Strategic Planning and Needs Assessment," p54. <<http://www.collierschools.com/headstart/docs/NeedsAssessment.pdf>>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p19.

A couple of years ago I took a group of middle school students to St. Matthew's House in Naples to volunteer in preparation for their annual Thanksgiving outreach. Since most of the children who had come to serve had never been to St. Matthew's House before, one of their leaders gave the group a tour and a brief history of their ministry before we started our work.

The guide talked about the significant scope of caring they do, but emphasized how their efforts impacted children the same age as my volunteers. When the guide mentioned that homelessness was a much bigger problem than we realized, one precocious preteen asked "really, how big?" The guide stopped our walking tour and said that during this school year each and every public school in Collier County has had at least one homeless child enrolled. After a long enough pause for that to really catch the attention of my young volunteers the guide followed up by saying, "I am sure someone you know is homeless, they are just too embarrassed or too proud to let you know."

I can tell you that this one story made a much greater impact on our group that day than any of the many impressive statistics that were shared or any of the labors of love we completed. I can also tell you that months later, many of these volunteers recognized that the few hours they gave up on a Saturday morning really mattered.

In the same way, I could stand before you and read the sort of numbers that substantiate our congregation cares about children. I could tell you how many dollars were given to this group or how many items were donated to that group.

I could calculate and tabulate, I could gesticulate and exacerbate, I could even pontificate and disseminate. Instead, let me tell the story.

United Church is committed to justice for all people, especially for the children in our community.

- We welcome children to our campus every weekday into the Mission Place Learning Center.
- We welcome children to our campus every weekend for scouting through Boy Scout Venture Crew 320.

We provide a place where price isn't a barrier for families to clothe their children at the Bargain Basket. And we use the funds generated

by that ministry and the gifts of our generous donors to seek justice for children through many mission partners, including:

- Grace Place,
- Habitat for Humanity,
- Harry Chapin Food Bank,
- Shelter for Abused Women and Children, and
- St. Matthew's House.

We are doing a great deal, and yet we cannot lose sight of the Parable of the Persistent Widow. Going back to that biblical story, I want you to ask yourself how did she get to the judge? What was it that she kept on doing that led him to action?

The Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes Jr., Senior Minister Emeritus of The Riverside Church and president of the Healing of the Nations Foundation, preached about this parable last year. In that sermon he imagined that the persistent widow handed a note to the judge. Listen to the words he places on that note. Let them be your call to action, your prayer, and your reason to persist on behalf of children.

Justice is the air I breathe— I can't live without it!

It's not enough to complain and grieve,  
I've got to do something about it!

I'm gonna strategize and organize—  
I'm gonna vote and take a stand.

I'm gonna pray each day and agitate  
until justice is the law of the land.<sup>10</sup>

I may not be able to do much, but I'm gonna put my faith into action.  
Will you join me?

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> James A. Forbes. "No Justice, No Righteousness." A sermon preached in Cincinnati, OH on July 22, 2012.  
< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JQvTImr0W0&feature=share&list=PLF4D78FBDA94D3C54>>