

Sermon for Sunday, October 20 Luke 18:1-18 "Tenacious"

Tenacity is a virtue, in general. We admire those who have what we call "stick-to-itiveness," who hang in there. Our stories are full of those who hang in there and keep pressing until their task is done. Nelson Mandela, who spent decades imprisoned on Robbin Island as a result of his fight against apartheid. Winston Churchill, whose parents thought he was mentally slow, and who faced political triumphs and reversals throughout his career. Olympic medalist Wilma Rudolph, who suffered from polio as a child but triumphed in track and field.

We laud these people who persevered.

And then there is the widow in our Gospel reading this morning.

Yes, she's tenacious.

Yes, she has "stick-to-itiveness."

But she is also a royal pain, especially to the judge.

Sometimes tenacity doesn't feel so noble.

And we would laugh at the story and the miserable old widow who pestered the judge, and that would be the end of the story.

But it isn't about the widow, this story, as much as she seems to be the center of the tale.

It's something very different.

It's all about the judge.

The judge, whom Jesus describes as "a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people." Not a very nice person, despite his power and fine robes and position in the community. Who knows what measure he uses to define justice? He doesn't look to God. He doesn't respect people. He has no one except himself. And his decision in the case of this annoying old woman is a prime example of this. He doesn't decide in her favor because he thinks she is right. He doesn't decide in her favor because it is required by Torah. He decides in her favor simply because she is a pain in his *tuchus* and he wants her to go away.

Not a very righteous giver of justice, even though justice is served.

So if we focus on the judge and see him as something less than a good judge, does that change our view of the widow. Widows were the bottom rung of the ladder in terms of status and power. If we want an example of someone who needs all the tenacity in their being simply to survive, the widow is it. Does she know that tenacity is the only way she can get justice? Is she a prophetic voice, much as the widow Anna was when Jesus was brought to the temple as a newborn? Is she, in fact, free to use her voice because she doesn't have a husband saying "go back home and fix dinner?" Might she, in her annoying tenacity, be doing precisely what she is supposed to do, seeking justice for those who do not have justice?

So why does Jesus tell this story? What is he trying to illustrate? He's a smart teacher, and knows that a funny story, using an aggravating old woman, a common comedy archetype, will draw his listeners in. And he's telling the story to remind his followers to keep praying and not lose hope.

Lose hope for what? The story certainly seems to be about justice, about respect, about fairness. Jesus' followers – all the people of Israel, in fact – are oppressed by the Roman overlords. Jesus' followers in particular are disrespected by the Jewish leadership. It is logical that Jesus' followers would hope that things might be different, that they might be treated with respect, that they might escape the pressure of being the hated ones in a society where there were levels upon levels of hatred of those who were different.

So Jesus tells them this slightly silly story. Slightly silly, but mostly deadly serious. Because she wouldn't let go. She wouldn't stop asking for what she needed. She wouldn't stop praying, even though her pestering of the judge might not look like praying.

Jesus does something unusual as he tells this parable. Most often, when Jesus tells a parable, he lets the story stand for itself and doesn't explain it, and sometimes the disciples have to ask him what he means. But here, He finishes the story by telling the followers the moral of the tale. He thinks it is important enough that he wants to make absolutely clear what he means. "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?"

Here's the emphasis on persistent prayer...those who cry to him day and night. And there is also the promise of relief, God quickly granting justice to them. But then there is a poignant coda: When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

This is not about perseverance alone, although perseverance is important. This is not about prayer alone, although we are encouraged to pray without ceasing. This is not about justice, although we will have it at some point, perhaps sooner than later.

It is about faith.

Faith is what causes us to pray. Without faith, there would be no point to prayer. Faith is what inspires us to believe that justice will be served. Without faith, justice is a mere whim or legalism. Faith is what reminds us that some day, the Son of Man will return.

Are we tenacious enough to keep praying for justice for all? Can we persevere and be patient until the time when the Son of Man returns? Can we have faith enough to expect that God will hear us, respond to us, comfort us, teach us, until that day comes?

Let us pray:

Gracious God, the one who offers eternal justice, give us the faith to pray and keep praying until your reign on earth is realized. Keep us faithful and prayerful, and keep us looking forward to the day when the Son of Man returns and finds us still faithful, still praying, still serving, as you would have us serve.

Amen.