

All In

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on January 23, 2022 Friendship Presbyterian Church

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?" (Luke 18:1-8, NRSV)

John Wesley was the founder of what would become the Methodist Church, and he was a tireless and persistent laborer in the fields of the Lord. His life wasn't easy, and he met much opposition. Recently, I came across this excerpt from a diary he kept during his most active years ...

- Sunday AM, May 5 Preached in St. Anne's. Was asked not to come back anymore.
- Sunday PM, May 5 Preached in St. John's. Deacons said, "Get out and stay out."
- Sunday AM, May 12 Preached in St. Jude's. Can't go back there, either.
- Sunday AM, May 19 Preached in St. Somebody Else's. Deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.
- Sunday PM, May 19 Preached on street. Kicked off street.
- Sunday AM, May 26 Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service.
- Sunday AM, June 2 Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway.
- Sunday PM, June 2 Afternoon, preached in a pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me.

Author Irving Stone spent a lifetime studying greatness, writing novelized biographies of such figures as Michelangelo, Vincent van Gogh, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Darwin. Stone was once asked if he had found a thread that runs through the lives of all these exceptional people. He said, "I write about people who sometime in their life ... have a vision or dream of something that should be accomplished ... and they go to work. They are beaten over the head, knocked down, vilified, and for years they get nowhere. But every time they're knocked down, they stand up. You cannot destroy these people. And at the end of their lives, they've accomplished some modest part of what they set out to do."

This Sunday, we are starting a short sermon series on Jesus' parables. The series title is "Pushing the Limits" and will feature five parables over five Sundays that have something important to say to us in these days when we – as individuals and as communities (and even as

a society!) – may feel that we’re at an *impasse* ... and that to move forward faithfully, we’re going to have to think “outside the box” and be OK with coloring outside the lines.

Our first parable presents itself as one teaching the importance of persistence in our spiritual lives, on the necessity of perseverance in our prayers and work, and of not giving up. It has two characters – a judge who neither feared God nor respected people, and a desperate widow who came to him again and again, pleading for justice.

Jesus’ original hearers would have found such a scenario all too familiar, living as they did in an occupied country. The great Bible expositor William Barclay points out that the judge would be understood to be a paid magistrate appointed by Herod Antipas or by the Romans. Such were well-known for their corruption.

We aren’t told what the widow’s case is about, though she may well have been in dispute with the Roman authorities or an otherwise powerful person. Perhaps property had been seized illegally for the non-payment of taxes, or grain commandeered by Roman soldiers had not been paid for, or the widow had been inadequately compensated for land seized for a Roman building project. Whatever the circumstances, the original hearers would understand that hers was a hopeless case.

Why is it hopeless? Because of her *status*. This widow is *nothing* in the eyes of the judge or of society. Poor and childless, she is a *nobody*, with no influence at all. She clearly lacks the money to pay the judge off, and *her* world and *his* world are light years apart. She is *alone*, apparently with no friends or family to help her get justice.

But she *does* fight on. She keeps coming back, day after day after day. She doesn’t give up. She puts everything on the line. She’s “all in” because this case isn’t a *casual* interest of hers. This case is life or death.

But for a while, we’re told, this unjust judge ignores her pleas. By his own admission, he doesn’t care about God or God’s commandments, and is indifferent to the suffering of others. His only guiding principles are those of expediency and self-interest. And without some silver coins to line his pockets, he’s uninterested in even hearing such a case.

But she keeps coming back, day after day after day. And then, finally, it happens. The unjust judge reaches his breaking point. He gives in and grants her the justice she’s been seeking ... not because she suddenly comes up with money, nor because he suddenly sees the light, but because he feels *worn out*! In fact, a loosely literal translation of the original Greek here would be “I will grant her justice, in order that she might not punch me in the face”!

And so, what’s the lesson here? Browbeat people into submission? Punch bad guys in the face? Not exactly, as satisfying as that might be. It’s an odd story for Jesus to tell, given how widespread the experience of the widow was among his original hearers, and that so many of them were well-acquainted with pleas made day after day – in both human and divine courts –

to no avail. In a way, this story “pushes the limits,” not only by evoking an all-too-familiar story of justice delayed and denied to teach persistence in prayer, but also calling his hearers to carry on doing something that may make no sense anymore.

Nonetheless, the point may seem fairly straight-forward – based on an argument from the lesser to the greater. We should learn from the persistence of the widowed nobody with a hopeless case, for if even an *unjust* judge will *eventually* grant justice to one who keeps coming back and never quits, *how much more* will *God*, who *loves* us, hear his people’s persistent prayers for justice, for a greater and greater taste of the Kingdom now, and answer them. And so, this reading naturally drives us to ask ... Are *we* persistent in prayer? Are we “all in” for the long haul, as the original hearers of these words surely were?

Now, the text doesn’t resolve the tension between the haste with which God is promised to respond and the fact that the words are addressed to people who have already been praying and waiting for a *long time*. We know from our own lives that the life of prayer is a *lifetime* of asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting, sometimes fainting, sometimes growing angry. But then, we know that Jesus was no stranger to this kind of waiting either. As we strive on, as we persist in prayer, the parable promises that we *will* see God at work, healing and restoring life.

So, there you are. We get it. But is that *it*? Something *easy* to understand and *much harder* to do? Jesus, of course, deals in that sort of thing, but I have to believe that there’s something more: And with Jesus’ *parables*, there’s *always* something more! They pretty much *always* allow for multiple interpretations. *And that is exactly what Jesus intends*. Looking at this story from another angle, another point of view, may well yield something surprising.

We can do that here, too. It’s entirely natural to see the widow as us, or at least a more hopeless stand-in for us ... the one from whom we are to learn. And of course, this is true. We miss a huge part of what the parable can teach us if we don’t grasp that. This widow in the parable has nothing, and seemingly no basis for hope, and yet, she keeps coming back again and again. She’s totally committed to the cause. She’s ALL IN. And so, we are called to be.

But I have a confession to make: A big part of me has a hard time identifying with her. Perhaps because my place in the world is a lot closer to the *judge’s* than it is to hers. Maybe because I’ve never felt like I *needed* to fight for my life or felt like I had to come back again and again, with little hope, of getting a justice that I was never denied.

The truth is, I can identify with the *judge* at least as much as I can with the widow – probably much *more*! Now I would like to believe that I “fear God,” that I have at least a basic sense of fairness and decency. I *don’t* believe that I’m in the wrong line of work! But then, how many times have I shut things out ... shut the real suffering of others out ... failed to even try to understand where cries of pain are coming from, or why they are?

We all agree of course that compassion is to be preferred over indifference. But the judge’s path is the path of least resistance, of least inconvenience. And sometimes, it may our path too.

We are meant to be the widow, not the one who callously looks the other way. But Jesus tells this open-ended parable because he knows that that Judge is not just a fictional character. He's in *here*. He's not the *only* one in here, but he *is* in here. His ways are uncomfortably familiar.

But this very confession opens up a startling alternative way of understanding the challenge of this story. For if we see ourselves now in the role of the Judge, we might see that the *widow's* role is now filled by *God*. It is now *God* who is revealed as persistent ... It is *God* who comes back again and again ... It is *God* who cries out for justice ... *God* who stands with the marginalized and pleads with *us* to open *our* eyes to their pain ... *God* who is totally committed to this cause ... *God* who is ALL IN, inviting us to be ALL IN too, sharing in his anguish and passion for the world.

In this way, the parable goes beyond a teaching on the discipline of prayer, to epitomize the life to which God calls us, the one Jesus himself lived ... a life which, in the face of many mysteries, is wholly committed to a God who is wholly committed to us. And this is what Christian discipleship is finally about.

In this new year, it is God who is pleading ... God who is calling us to deeper levels of commitment, an ever more total response to the Lord of all. Are we ALL IN? May the answer today and always be Yes! May we be ALL IN for lives persistent in prayer ... ALL IN for seeking God's Kingdom in every area of our lives ... ALL IN for the world that God loves ... ALL IN for the God is ALL IN for us!

To the Glory of God! Amen.