

She Persisted

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It is a delight to be back with you, and even more of a delight to be here with you in person.

Friends, we just read one of my favorite stories, with one of my favorite biblical characters. We are going to go there, but first I want to begin with another woman. There are many who cross my mind, but I will choose one—her name is Agnes.



When I met her, I was the Executive Director of KAIROS and she was the coordinator of the South Sudan Council of Churches women's program. The first time I saw her it was almost four years ago on a snowy night in November when in an act of significant courage, she had travelled from South Sudan to wintry Canada.

She was beginning a three-week tour in Canada, to share the story of her work, the work of human rights and peacebuilding led by the women of South Sudan.

I liked her right way. Her motherliness was inclusive and contagious. By just a day or two later, she had me calling her Mama Agnes.



I liked the way she advocated until we agreed that she could bring a young woman with her to Canada. I saw her mentor Awok, there in the picture, who over the three weeks went from saying a few shy sentences to becoming a public speaking rock star.

I liked the way she showed a power, gentle, but firm. When in an interview Steve Paikin of TVO asked an inappropriate question she respectfully but firmly put him in his place. They cut it out of the interview when it aired because it made him look bad.

To this day, when I think of Agnes, I think of an extraordinary persistence. She said it this way: “I was born in war, was married in war, raised children in war, and became a grandmom in war...” And yet, as ever present, and relentless has been the conflict, so too has been her advocacy for genuine and lasting peace. Hers is risky persistent choice to gather women across the dividing lines of race and religion, to help insert women’s voices in official peacebuilding processes, to hold public vigils against the conflict, to run human rights trainings and reconciliation workshops for those who have experienced trauma.

All of this work, is for Agnes, an expression of faithfulness to her God—essentially embodied prayer. It is quite literally prayer. My favorite story from South Sudan is from time when the women’s program was having difficulty getting women out to events on women’s rights. The chief impediments were their husbands or fathers—they simply were not being allowed to go. Agnes changed the program to prayer meetings, and women were then “allowed” to come—and what did they do? —they prayed about women’s rights. Mama Agnes--persistent for peace.



Let’s turn now to the gospel story. I love this story and not only because a feisty woman wins the day. It has always intrigued me. One of the most interesting parts is the subtitle given by Luke. He is a master storyteller so we should pay attention. According to Luke this is a tale about “the need to pray always and never give up.” It is very strange introduction for what comes next.

Instead of hearing about what conventionally resembles prayer, what Luke gives us is a story about relentless advocacy for justice.



The main characters are archetypal— a woman, a widow, and a man, a judge – opposites in the social and political context of the time. But to the listener—connected. Because if things are going right in Israel—if there is right relation in covenant—someone like him, should have ensured the care and protection of someone like her.

The way that judge is described —neither God fearing nor with respect for people (repeated twice in case we miss it)—is exactly counter to who he should be—one who “rescues the oppressed, defends the orphan, pleads for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). Because the characters are unnamed kind of caricatures, we get a clue that we should read this text not only as a personal interaction. We should read systemically, about an unjust system, in which the widow should have no hope, but persists, nonetheless. “Nevertheless, she persisted”

Remember that the story goes like this: The widow persists in demanding justice (v. 3); the judge is so worn out that he finally grants it (v. 5); and Jesus tells us how different God will be—granting justice “quickly” and “without delay” (vv. 7f).

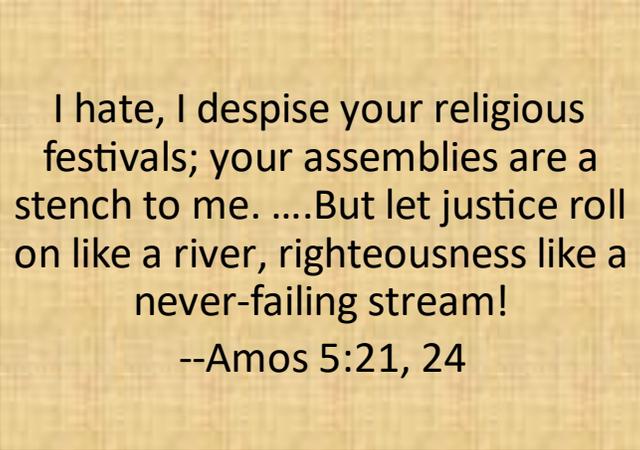
What is very clear—what is crystal clear—is that it is not wisdom or compassion that brings change. She wears him out, until he relents.

I think there are three important points to take from this story:

**First that the work advocating for what is right, is holy work—for Luke it is as a prayer.** In Luke's world, we could rename our social justice committee as the prayer committee, our advocacy campaigns as prayer vigils.

When Luke reminds us of this concept—that justice and holiness are linked, that to advocate—and here I am talking about seeking systemic change, structural change—Luke reminds us that to advocate is to pray. We know that he's tapping into a long tradition in the Hebrew scriptures that say something quite similar—

Let's recall our cranky friend the prophet Amos...



I hate, I despise your religious  
festivals; your assemblies are a  
stench to me. ....But let justice roll  
on like a river, righteousness like a  
never-failing stream!  
--Amos 5:21, 24

“I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me.

.... But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Or remember the go-to Micah 6-8—a little less cranky. What does the Lord require of you?

Lets hear it: Do justice love kindness, walk humbly with your God

**Advocacy is a spiritual discipline. To seek justice is religious practice.**

To be right with God, to be holy...is not that burnt offering thing, pietistic ritual, lavish sacrifices, or even only super good church—it includes the doing of daring justice.

This is important because we don't usually organize our churches like this—



We tend to separate faith and liturgy from justice and peace, or we often think about justice as the thing we do after we do the real stuff. But here we have a gospel (backed up by Hebrew scripture) that refuses to separate them—justice is an expression of holiness, advocacy, social action, even on the street protest or civil disobedience is as prayer.

I think sometimes about the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel who after walking in the Civil rights march in Selma Alabama said famously, “I felt my feet were praying.” I wonder where reclaiming our advocacy,

or even our sometimes-necessary public vigils and street protest, as holy work, as liturgy, might take us.

The second point we might take from this text, is that **wisdom cannot always be anticipated, compassion cannot always be expected.** There is tendency in some of our churches to think, if we just explain—climate emergency, guaranteed annual income--surely minds will be opened, hearts will be moved. And we might hope so, but the reality is that sometimes privilege gets in the way. Talk about someone with both informal and formal power—our male judge cannot see through his own privilege and interest. His lack of capacity to own his power, means not only that he fails to be an ally—a covenantal expectation—but he is an obstacle in the path of the widow’s efforts.

Sometimes in our work for justice—again, I am talking not only about compassion and outreach—but that change, policy, change system, get at root causes stuff. Sometime in seeking justice, we can fail to honestly identify, to clearly map, the power and interest that might be at the root of opposition.



For example, in the work for women's or LGBTQ rights, we can underestimate male power and the systems that prop it up, we can underestimate how norming heterosexism still is. That's why for the South Sudan Women's Program the work to create and sustain male allies is very important—they call it Side by Side. The men that they cultivate and train as allies, add a strong force to their efforts. They don't plan on benevolence; they plan for strength. Women leading, and male allies coming along beside. I wonder whether we might better map our contexts, anticipate opposition, and work harder at nurturing allies in whatever struggle we commit to.

The third point we might take from this text is perhaps the most central to the gospel, **that persistence brings transformation**. The only reason the judge ultimately gives in is the widow's relentless advocacy. Against all odds, against all hope, she won't let go until she experiences justice. And it comes—persistence brings transformation. We are to advocate for what is right, against all odds. To persist.

The biblical scholars tell us that there is more a little sexism in the Greek of this passage—she's strident, she's emotional, she's hysterical, she's literally nagging him to death. I think we know that when communities persist, when LGBTQ folks assert the fullness of their identities, when women or racialized communities stand up for their rights, they and their leaders can be maligned with all the nasty stuff there is—"she's strident." And yet it is our job to come alongside, to persist in advocacy to keep going, to advocate without ceasing and never give up, because my friends—our God will grant justice to those who call to Her day and night—persistence brings transformation.



I wonder who are the persistent widows of our day. Whoever they are—in such a time as this—I think we want to be coming alongside them. We want to be about recognizing them in our midst, church, neighbourhood, country, or world and turning up the volume on their voice and efforts.

As we do so, let's hope for benevolence but don't plan for it. Let's look carefully at our own privilege and power—things like examining white privilege as individuals, or colonial power as churches--and begin to do what we must to subvert and dismantle it.

Above all may we persist. The most important—life changing justice issues--are rarely a Lenten study or a 1-year educational theme. Anything that needs changing—structural change, bringing down the principalities and powers--requires decades, maybe even centuries. We find hope in the struggle. Persistence brings forth transformation.

In our journey towards turn the world around change, stories are important. Ancient biblical stories like this one, that offer some key insights about gospel practice. But so too stories about change, about persistence that brings transformation.



I pray that the Elders among us be invited to tell the stories. Of when there was apartheid in South Africa, and Black South Africans led an international movement, including the work of Canadian churches, which brought it to an end. Still much work to do to end racism, address inequality, but persistence brought transformation.

I can remember the days before LGBTQ folks could legally adopt, the days before marriage equality. People like my friends Joyce and Alison and their kids Robbie and Hannah helped bring that discrimination to an end.

My daughter Cassie has always had two legal moms—no worries about the wrong mum showing up in the emergency room with a sick child. I tell her that story, she now tells that story, because that change happened through persistent advocacy. We need the stories, because when we stare the impossible in the face, we need to remember that our God is resurrection-size transformation, and our place is to come alongside in persistence until it is so.

My friends, what you do as a community in the pursuit of justice, whether it be meetings with MPs, or vigils, or petitions, or even, at times, civil disobedience, believe that your advocacy is at the very centre of holiness. I pray that you continue to ally with the persistent ones in action that troubles the waters, bothers unjust systems, stirs up radical dreams, and especially emboldens feisty women, girls, and gender non-confirming folk. I pray that you tell the stories of change, little breakthroughs, and big, huge transformations, when walls come tumbling down, to keep up each others hope. May we demonstrate our faithfulness to God by praying without ceasing in the relentless pursuit of justice. Because nothing my friends, nothing, is impossible in Christ who is our transformation.

Amen