

The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for October 19, 2025
Luke 18:1-8
"Be Persistent for Change"

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O God.
Amen.

In the Parable of the Unjust Judge, Jesus selects a widow as the model for discipleship. This widow, as any other widow in Jesus' time, had no one to intercede for her in the decisions of the judge. The widow, as a woman alone in the first century, was vulnerable to being taken advantage of in any number of ways. She was easy prey to those who would take advantage of her dire financial straits and her physical vulnerability. She was probably up against a wealthy opponent and his bribes, but she was so poor that she had no money by which to bribe the judge for herself.

The question of bribery is not out of question for this parable, for this judge was one who had "no fear of God and no respect for anyone." The person who would have heard these words while listening to Jesus speak would understand that the lack of fear for God naturally entailed lack of respect for human beings, since the two were closely related throughout the Hebrew Bible. A judge in Israel was not only expected to be an unbiased umpire, but a defender for those who had no defender, the champion of the oppressed – the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the foreigner. Because God was the one who cared especially for the victims of persecution, it was necessary for any judge to see that the rights of the powerless were heard.

The judge in the story today did not fear God and therefore considered himself under no mandate to be a defender to the defenseless. The widow came to the judge asking him to secure her rights, but the judge refused to act on her behalf. There is no indication of what her cause is, who has wronged her, or what she wants. And no details about the judge's reluctance to do so. We don't know what the opponent she wants justice from has done to her, but whatever it is, she is not going to stand for it. The woman persisted in her demands for justice.

Finally, the judge succumbed to her persistence and 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."

The translation that she will "wear him out" has been diluted over time. A more literal translation of the judge's grievance is that the woman "is giving me a black eye." Like all black eyes, the one the widow's complaints threaten to inflict have a double effect, representing both physical and social distress. That is, the judge complains that the widow's relentless badgering may not only cause him physical harm but also risks publicly

embarrassing him. For this reason, he says – perhaps justifying his actions to his wounded sense of self – that he relents not because he has changed his mind but simply to shut up this dangerous widow.

After the judge grants the woman's request, Jesus proceeds to put the questions to the hearer: "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" Here, Jesus is not holding up the conduct of an unjust judge for commendation. He is saying that if even an unrighteous judge will grant justice out of fear and self-interest, will not God, who is the champion of the poor and the oppressed, grant them the justice that they pray for and seek day and night?

The reign of God is vindication of the oppressed. It is glimpsed when the oppressed get justice, even when they have to take it from an unwilling and an unjust judge. It is glimpsed when we see one who is powerless demand and obtain for herself the justice that is hers.

Luke's point with this parable seems to be that we need to be persistent. Where has the persistent widow showed up in your life? Or, maybe better, who has been the persistent widow in your life? Perhaps it was an advocate for 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion, motivated by the love of a gay son, lesbian daughter, or transgender child, pushing for rights in school, government, and church. Perhaps it's the mother of a child in a wheelchair demanding better accessibility at school. Perhaps it's people you know on either side of the climate change debate, one passionate about care of creation and the other against the economic cost of proposed climate protections. Perhaps it was you, fighting for something you believe in even if no one else was on your side.

Persistence is important when encouraging ourselves and those suffering injustice to continue complaints and demands for justice. Persistence is needed for not only continual demands for justice, but also for change in the systems that are doing the oppressing in the first place. Jesus calls on us to "pray always and not to lose heart," reminding us that faith is not a passive undertaking. The things we toss and turn with in the night call out for our attention, advocacy, and justice. To fulfill this call, we must be willing to be persistent. We must be willing to bring our prayers to God unceasingly, trusting that our petitions will be heard. God, the Bible has persistently insisted, gives special attention to those who are most vulnerable; therefore, we should persist in our complaints, even to the point of embarrassing the powers that be in order to induce change.

But as you fight alongside God for the widow, the orphan, the poor, the foreigner, and anyone else who has been oppressed, remember this one word...Empathy. Empathy for the person on the other side of the conversation. Empathy for the widow or judge or someone in between. Empathy for each other and for ourselves. For while we are fighting to right an injustice, we must remember that we are all human beings who deserve to be respected and who crave the mercy, care, and justice of the God we know in Christ.

Amen.