

Wrestling with God

In our Old Testament reading this morning, from Genesis, Jacob wrestled through the night with a mysterious figure by the River Jabbok. He wouldn't let go until he received a blessing. When morning came, Jacob received two things – a limp, and a new name – Israel, which means, “he struggles with God.” Jacob's story teaches us that faith isn't passive. It's not polite. Faith clings.

Faith wrestles. Faith refuses to release its grip on the promises of God. Jesus speaks to this truth in our Gospel lesson this morning, through what's known as the parable of the persistent widow. In the same way that Jacob wrestled all night for a blessing, Jesus tells His disciples to “pray always and not give up.”

Persistent faith holds on when life is unfair. Friends, I don't need to tell you this, but life is fundamentally unfair. It has been ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden. Persistent faith, though, still believes even when answers are delayed. It refuses to let go of hope because it knows that God's justice – though sometimes slow, is always certain. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 18:1-8. **Read Luke 18:1-8.**

Persistent Prayer

Notice how our Gospel lesson opens this morning. “Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up,” (Luke 18:1). Right at the beginning, Jesus reveals His purpose for telling this parable. It's to show His followers that prayer isn't a one time act. It's a life-long posture. The phrase “not give up,” in the original Greek means to “not lose heart.”

Jesus knew that life would bring seasons when faith seems pointless, when it seems like our prayers just bounce off the ceiling. But He commands us to persist. I want us to really get this today – persistent prayer isn't about us changing God's mind, or trying to manipulate Him into doing things for us our way – it's all about shaping our own hearts to His will. It keeps us connected to the Source of hope when circumstances beyond our control tempt us to despair.

“He said, ‘In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary,’” (verses 2-3). There are two characters Jesus introduces us to in this parable. We meet a corrupt judge and a helpless widow. Jesus says, the judge “neither feared God nor cared what people thought.” We don't know the specifics of how he came into his position, but he's not worrying about getting reelected anytime soon.

A Crooked Judge and a Hopeless Widow

Or maybe, he's like some these dictators, who somehow win reelection over and over with 98% of the vote. Friends, there's no one on earth that popular – if a president

claims to win by that huge of a percentage, voter manipulation is a sure thing. Putin wins elections by that big of a margin, and so did Saddam Hussein. You know how? They tell their people to go vote, put their thugs at the polling places, and tell them to vote for the dictator, or they'll be killed. It's all a sham.

This judge is a crook, a loser, and a thug. He had no moral compass, no sense of right and wrong. And he didn't care about anyone but himself. We have a lot of politicians in this country – on both sides of the aisle, Democrat and Republican – like this judge. They're crooks, thugs, and cater to special interest groups because they get their pockets lined in the way they vote and pass things in Congress. They call that “pork-barrel spending,” and they all do it.

The widow, unlike the judge, had no power. No wealth. She didn't even have any social standing. Back in the day when Jesus first told this parable, widows were among the most vulnerable people in society. But this particular widow refused to be silent. She kept coming – she's persistent – the Greek word suggests it's a continuous, repeated action.

Her persistence becomes her protest. She doesn't have a sword. She doesn't have a lawyer. But she has faith – faith that refuses to stop asking. This widow, for us, is a symbol of what a faithful believer should be like – poor in worldly power, but rich in determination. She shows us that prayer isn't passively sitting around and waiting. It's active perseverance.

The Widow's Persistence Pays Off

Look what happens next. “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!’” (verses 4-5). I love how the *Amplified Bible* puts verse 5 in particular. It says, “Because this widow continues to bother me, I will defend and protect and avenge her, lest she give me intolerable annoyance and wear me out by her continual coming or at the last she come and rail on me or assault me or strangle me.”

That's really powerful imagery. The judge relents. But it's not because he feels compassion for her, it's because she's wearing him out. He's exhausted! Her persistence pays off because she wears him down. I love the image of her coming and “strangling” him. Is she really going to strangle or attack him? Of course not.

But the widow has become one of those people he dreads to see, because she's sucking the life out of him with her near constant nagging. This is what this boils down to here. It's really comical! Jesus has a great sense of humor, and He uses it here to make a really serious point: if even a corrupt judge can be moved by persistence, how much more will our loving God respond to the cries of His people? God's delays are not denials in our prayer lives, friends. Having persistent faith means that we trust that His timing is perfect, even when His silence feels painful.

God Hears Our Prayers

“And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night? Will He keep putting them off?’” (verses 6-7). Jesus contrasts the character of the unjust judge with the character of our just and merciful God. Their characters are as different as night is from the day. If injustice yields to persistence, how much more will righteousness respond to faith?

Our God hears the cries of those who call to Him “day and night,” Jesus tells us here. This phrase is deliberate. It paints a picture of unceasing prayer. We’re told to do that, you know. Paul the apostle tells us, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you,” (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

As followers of Jesus Christ, we keep lifting our hearts up to God – no matter what. There are Biblical examples of this. We are not alone! The Israelites did it in Egypt. Hannah did it in the temple – we read about her last Sunday in Sunday School. Or like the widow in our parable this morning – God’s people cry out, and His justice, though sometimes delayed, never, ever fails to arrive.

Will He Find Faith?

Jesus continues, “I tell you, He will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Lk. 18:8). The final verse in our Gospel lesson provides us with assurance, and a challenge. The assurance – God will bring justice. It’s a sure and certain thing. His timing may not align with ours. But when the moment comes, it will come – swiftly and surely!

The challenge – when Jesus returns, will He find faith? Friends, persistent faith is rare these days, especially here in America. It’s easy to believe for a moment – and to think that “once saved always saved” – because that’s what a lot of folks want to preach. You’ll never hear that message from me! I don’t subscribe to that line of thinking – it’s bad, lazy theology.

Real faith – persistent faith – is hard work! Holding onto faith for years, through unanswered prayers, suffering, and injustice – that’s real faith. That’s a faith that’s been refined like gold! So will the Son of Man find people still praying, still trusting, still believing? That’s the question that Jesus leaves ringing in our hearts.

Ruby Bridges

As a teacher, coming to the end of the first quarter of the school year, I’ve been thinking a lot this week about public education in America, mainly the history of it, and can’t get this picture¹ out of my mind. It’s a beautiful, tragic Norman Rockwell painting known as *The Problem We All Live With*. On November 14, 1960, in New Orleans, six-year-old Ruby Bridges became the first Black child to attend the previously all-white William Frantz Elementary School. The Supreme Court had already said segregation

¹ <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/e/ed/The-problem-we-all-live-with-norman-rockwell.jpg>

was unconstitutional – but the world around Ruby hadn't caught up yet with God's justice.

Every morning, federal marshals – they surround her in the picture – they escorted Ruby through an angry mob of protesters shouting hate-filled words. Parents pulled their children out of class rather than let them sit beside her. Teachers refused to teach – except one – Barbara Henry, who welcomed Ruby with kindness and courage. There are kids even today in schools throughout this country who face discrimination and mistreatment because of their race, their disabilities, their socioeconomic status, where they live, or who they live with.

It really is heart-breaking. What people don't know is that Ruby's strength came from persistent faith. Her mom taught her to pray as she walked through the crowds. Every morning, that little girl would bow her head and whisper, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Church, who else do we know who prayed that prayer? Jesus – while dying for us on the cross.

One day, a psychologist named Robert Coles watched Ruby's lips moving as she walked. He asked her what she was saying, and she explained that she was praying for the people who were shouting at her. She didn't stop. Day after day, she prayed. Through hate, Ruby Bridges held onto hope. Through fear, she clung to faith. Like the persistent widow in Jesus' parable, Ruby refused to give up – not on justice, not on people, and not on God. Ruby Bridges is a modern-day echo of Luke 18 – a child who believed that prayer could move mountains of hatred.

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Decades before Ruby Bridges walked the streets of New Orleans, James Weldon Johnson and his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson wrote *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. Originally it was a poem for Abraham Lincoln's birthday. It grew into a beloved hymn for many Black Americans – a song of persistent faith. "Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty..."² It's not just a song of triumph – it's a song of real struggle. It tells the truth about hardship: "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died..."

Yet it ends with a prayer of hope: "Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand, true to our God, true to our native land." Friends, remember – our native land is God's kingdom. That's persistent faith. It's a faith that sings while it still waits for justice. A faith that refuses to give up on God even when the world gives up on us.

This song has been sang on picket lines and at church gatherings, at marches and memorial services. Most recently it's become unofficially known as the "Black National Anthem" and gets played at NFL games along side *The Star-Spangled Banner*. It helps remind all people that even in suffering, God's hand is steady. He takes great care of us!

² *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing, 1989), page 519.

Other Historical Examples

Before the Civil War, slaves prayed and sang spirituals that cried out for deliverance. “Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land, tell old Pharaoh, to let My people go.”³ Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who went back to the South over and over as a conductor on the Underground Railroad was known as “Moses” because of how many people she helped escape from slavery. The slaves’ prayers rose for centuries, and though the world’s judges delayed justice, God’s justice did not sleep! Persistent faith carried them through the darkness until freedom came.

A hundred years later, leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Ruby Bridges – who we already mentioned – carried that same faith forward. Dr. King was a Baptist pastor. He often preached that “unearned suffering is redemptive.” Like the widow these people kept coming – petitioning, marching, praying – believing that righteousness would prevail. Dr. King even said, “We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁴ Persistent faith believes that arc is held firmly in the hand of Almighty God.

And yet, persistence isn’t just in the history books, friends. It lives in our everyday, ordinary lives. We see it at work in parents who keep praying for their children, pastors who keep preaching to weary hearts, and Christians who keep serving when the results are slow to appear. Jesus’ question – “Will the Son of Man find faith on the earth?” – is answered every time we see someone like Ruby Bridges, or you, or me – choose to keep trusting God despite what we see happening in the world around us.

Living With Persistent Faith

How do we cultivate this kind of persistent, enduring, wrestling faith? First, we have to pray even when we feel like quitting. The widow kept coming. Ruby kept praying. Don’t stop. God’s silence is never His absence.

We must never forget who God is. He’s not the unjust judge. He’s our righteous and loving Father. Our names are written on His heart – and He proves His love for us through the scars on the head, hands, feet, and side of Jesus Christ. God IS for us – He’s not against us!

When we go through trials, we need to be more comfortable in singing our way through the struggle – even if we’re off-key! Songs like *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, *We Shall Overcome*, and *It Is Well with My Soul* are great reminders for us that faith sings even when life hurts. Persistent faith isn’t just prayer – it’s also action. We have to be willing instruments of God’s justice in the world. The widow’s cry for justice should become part of our mission. To bring justice where we can.

And finally, we have to hold onto hope. The day is coming when the Son of Man will return – that’s great news! All wrongs will be made right! So friends, keep your lamps burning. Keep your prayers rising. Keep your faith alive!

³ *Go Down Moses*, Louie Armstrong.

⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” speech at the National Cathedral, 03/31/1968, retrieved 10/16/2025, from: <https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2015/01/19/the-arc-of-the-moral-universe/>

Don't Let Go Until the Blessing Comes

Jacob wrestled and said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me," (Gen. 32:26). The widow kept coming until justice was done. Ruby Bridges prayed until hearts were changed. That's persistent faith – a faith that keeps believing, keeps praying, keeps holding on through the long night. When Jesus returns, may He find in us a faith that refuses to let go.

So keep praying, even when the answer delays. Keep singing, even when your voice trembles. Keep believing, even when the world is so unfair. Because the God who heard Jacob by the river, who answered the widow in her town, who strengthened a little girl walking to school, is the same God who hears our cries today. His justice WILL come. His blessing WILL come. So don't let go until it does!

Prayer: Gracious God, Thank You for the gift of faith that holds on when life gets hard. Teach us to pray without ceasing and to trust Your timing when we can't see the way. Give us the courage of Jacob, the perseverance of the widow, and the childlike faith of a little girl just trying to go to school. Help us to lift every voice in praise – even when the road is rough. Strengthen our hearts to keep believing that Your justice will come, Your promises will stand, and Your Kingdom will prevail. In the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray and never give up, we say – Amen!