

*October 16, 2022, the Season of Gratitude
Stewardship Sunday
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson*

I love the parable in today's gospel reading.

I love the image of this persistent widow – which is really how the parable should be referred (“The Persistent Widow”) rather than how it's usually referred which is “the unjust judge”

I get why they call it that, because Jesus is comparing the unjust judge to the unconditionally just God – and I am grateful to God that God hears and cares for those who “cry out to [God] day and night”

But, I love the widow!

The widow's impact on today's story is even, apparently, toned down a bit in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible which we read from this morning

Brittany Wilson, who's an Assistant Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C notes in her commentary on this morning's text that the widow's “persistence and call for justice is such that the judge characterizes her actions as those of a boxer.”

Seriously – Dr. Wilson goes on, she says: “It is difficult to discern this boxing image in the NRSV, which translates the judge's words as follows: ‘because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming’ (verse 5). In the original Greek, though, the judge says: “because this widow causes trouble for me, I will give her justice, so that she may not, in the end, give me a black eye by her coming’ (verse 5).”

The author of this text literally uses a Greek verb which means “to give a black eye” situating the judge’s language within the arena of boxing metaphors.

Dr. Wilson bemoans that “when English translations do not capture the [true] meaning of this verb, they soften the tenacity of the widow’s actions, as well as her perceived status as a ‘trouble-maker’ to the system.”¹

I couldn’t be more grateful for this widow!

And, I’m grateful that Jesus loves this widow!

This persistent, boxing widow is Jesus’ example when teaching his disciples to “pray always and not to lose heart” (18:1)

I do have to remind myself that this widow is the lead character of one of Jesus’ parables, not necessarily a real person, but all the more she is an incredible teacher and inspiration

Francisco García, a Ph.D. Candidate in Theological Studies, Ethics and Action at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee, wrote in his commentary this week that the story about this incredible widow “invites preachers and all who would receive it to think of prayer as an active, dynamic, relational, and even mystical enterprise between us and God.”

Francisco goes on to reflect that this parable shows us that “authentic prayer is faith in action. It is a constant believing and working for a more just and humane world that reflects God’s wellspring of mercy and justice.”²

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-luke-181-8-4>

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-luke-181-8-5>

What a different image from what we usually think of when we think of prayer, isn't it?

So often, prayer is taught as something we do in private – at our bedsides or at our dinner tables with our heads bowed, our hands folded, and usually starting with something like “Dear God”

Or, it's something we do in church, usually with words written down for us so that we dare not make something up and say the wrong thing

And, hear me plainly say – that IS prayer and it is wonderful and it is holy

When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, he gives us the prayer we say every Sunday and have come to call the Lord's Prayer

There is certainly a place for wrote prayer

And, this widow and her story, teach us that prayer also looks like persistent protest for justice

Thanks be to God for that – let the prayers of the protesting women in Iran be heard: “Women! Life! Freedom!”

Francisco reminds us that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th Century, said: “I felt my legs were praying,” in reflecting on his participation in the historic 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery.

Francisco then concludes: “Prayer itself can literally embody action.”

Not just the words that we say, but the actions we take

We pray with voices and with our hearts in private – we also pray with our voices and our hands and our feet and our wheels in public

Can we also say that we pray with our money?

In seminary, I had a professor who once said: “When you buy something, you vote”

His point being that where you choose to put your resource of money – whether it be buying a pair of shoes or making a charitable donation – that action is a value statement

When we buy something we “vote” for the values, ethics, livelihood of that particular item and its producer – our support can help something thrive, and our boycotting of something can be a statement against injustice and unfair practices

When we buy something, we vote

And, since that moment that my professor said that, I’ve thought very seriously about every way I’ve spent my money – from which coffee shops I buy from to where my money is invested in my retirement accounts

Could I slightly change my professor’s comment and say “when you buy something, you pray?”

When you buy something, you are offering your blessing

When you donate to a charity, you are praying for the success of that charity’s mission

When you invest money in retirement accounts, you’re praying for health and safety in years to come

It’s not that far a stretch to consider, is it?

When I think about money in this way, I have a more nuanced understanding of our calling to stewardship – one that is not just something about responsibility and duty but something about gift, hope...prayer

And, I mean stewardship both in terms of a general stewardship of God's great creation and I mean specifically the stewardship of the ministries of this church.

This week, many of you received a stewardship letter from our wonderful St. Bart's stewardship committee asking you to ponder and prepare your pledge for St. Bart's ministries in 2023

It is an ask for your money, yes – it is an ask for your prayers, your active, dynamic, relational, mystical prayers – your faith in action

Prayers that we as a congregation might be persistent in our efforts, like the widow, to seek out justice in our community; to worship with deep commitment as a gathered body that we might be transformed for the sake of grace in our lives and the lives of all we touch; that our little sliver of the Christian and Episcopal church might be vibrant and relentless in our pursuit of God's good Kin-dom "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Prayers of hope. Prayers of faithfulness. Prayers of enthusiasm. Prayers of Gratitude.

Dr. Wilson writes that "prayer is not a passive activity but one that actively seeks God and pursues God's will"

Justice is not a passive activity but one that actively seeks God and pursues God's will

Hope is not a passive activity but one that actively seeks God and pursues God's will.

Time is not a passive activity but one that actively seeks God and pursues God's will.

Money is not a passive activity but one that actively seeks God and pursues God's will.

Friends, let us pray together – let us pray in wild gratitude with our voices, with our hands and feet and wheels, with our hearts, with our votes, with our money, with our gifts and talents, with our time

Let us pray to the glory of God, Amen.