

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Loving Perseverance*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Babs Miller  
June 12, 2011

Scripture Readings: Luke 18:1-8 and I John 4:7-8; 17-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Our parable this morning is interesting not only for what it says but also for what it does not say. It never states what the widow is asking for from the judge. Nor does it say that the judge ever really listened to the widow's concerns. He only says he will grant her request to get her off his back. This may sound familiar to many gathered here today whose partner keeps bugging them about some project or request they have on their "honey do" list. You too might agree to whatever it is just to keep your significant other from bugging you. You too might be agreeing to something unknown like going to the ballet when you hate ballet. Or, you might be agreeing to let your spouse play golf on the same week-end that you have scheduled a big garage sale at your house. It's also interesting that Jesus says this parable is about prayer and never giving up but in our parable, there is never another mention of prayer. However, in defense of Jesus, the next parable is about prayer and the parable we just read is definitely about never giving up. And I suspect that this widow did a lot of praying as she continued seeking justice from this judge.

What the story has to say about this widow and this judge is very important. The unnamed widow is very assertive for a woman of this era. Widows, orphans and strangers were the powerless, the voiceless and the homeless in their midst. There are numerous references to God's instructing the people to care for these individuals as part of their commitment to God. Widows no longer had a husband to provide for them and they could not inherit their deceased husband's estate. Everything went to the eldest son or the brother of the husband, which led to many disputes involving widows and orphans.

Judges were charged with the responsibility of hearing complaints fairly and impartially. There was no jury of your peers -- only the judge. So the judge's responsibility was to declare God's judgment and establish shalom among God's people. But the judge in our story neither feared God nor cared about the people. He represents the antithesis of God's justice and compassion for the oppressed. One could speculate that such an unscrupulous judge might be waiting for a bribe from the widow before passing judgment, or perhaps he is responding to the widow's more powerful adversary. This is the judge that stands between the widow and justice. She is persistent and the judge finally states that he will grant her request so she will stop bothering him. He also states that he will grant it so she does not come and strike him "under the eye". This literal translation has been taken to mean that her request is being granted so she does not wear the judge out by continually coming to him.

Jesus wonders how anyone of faith can doubt that God will intervene for the powerless and voiceless if even an arrogant judge will eventually respond to the requests of this persevering widow. But Jesus also wonders if there will be anyone left who has remained faithful to the end of time. One way to

demonstrate one's faith would be to remain as persistent as the widow who demanded justice against all odds.

Our second scripture is all about love that has integrity and love without fear. Listen again to part of our opening verse: "Everyone who loves is begotten of God and has knowledge of God." It goes on to say "those who abide in love abide in God and God in them." It doesn't say "some people who love" it says "everyone who loves." This includes the powerless of our world. It includes the voiceless in our society. No one who loves is left out.

This message is the same in all major religions. Christianity says to love is to be more fully part of the divine. Gandhi said: "The force of love is the same as the force of the soul or Truth." And for Gandhi truth was spelled with a capital "T" because he saw Truth as God and God as Truth. Truth was life affirming to Gandhi. For Gandhi, if something did not affirm life it could not be called Truth.

Let me make another reference to our scripture today. This is about the part that said "love brought to perfection". Now I know some of you may have heard this and said "they aren't talking about me-I can't express perfect love". But if you look at the meaning of perfection in the Greek it means "being brought to completion in the sense of reaching a goal". And if that's what perfect love is, we are all capable of that. Perfected love is mutual love that insures God's presence. Insofar as we love one another, Spirit abides in us and Spirit's love is perfected in us. And, like the widow, we must be lovingly persistent in order to perfect our love.

In the midst of this clear message that God is love and love is God, as a church and as a society, we still manage to exclude rather than include and to lose sight of what is the loving thing to do. Many of you know that we, as a church, have persevered for many years seeking the vote that just recently passed in a majority of Presbyteries to include rather than exclude GLBT folks. Now, at least in theory, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered persons can have full membership in the church, which includes the possibility of ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, just like everyone else.

We never left the church during all those years of oppression; we talked about it from time to time, we were asked about it from our friends and allies, but we agreed that it was a fight that we needed to stay with and continue to persevere in and not leave the church over. But, now that the process of full inclusion has begun, there are already movements afoot to change this. Within our own Presbytery there is a letter circulating that suggests the formation of a new presbytery within the bounds of Mission Presbytery. Suddenly, some church leadership in our presbytery have decided that having to allow a standard which in good conscience they cannot endorse gives them the right to pull out and form a Presbytery of like-minded churches. In other words, it gives them the right to exclude rather than include. Let me read a little from a proposal they have drafted:

"In an effort to disengage from the contentious battles in our presbyteries over these matters before they begin and seek a faithful context which ensures our consciences won't be violated, we propose the formation of a new presbytery in central Texas..... While we lament the loss of national standards for ordination in our denomination, if we can join with like-minded Presbyterians who share a common purpose, a core theology on which we agree, and a missional focus to our ministry and mission, we can find a way to remain in the PCUSA while at the same time remain faithful to our calling in Christ and in a manner that doesn't violate our conscience."

I ask you- where is the love in all this? Excluding those who *don't think like I do* leads to hate and hate ultimately destroys—it does not build up. That is why we are called to lovingly persevere. Loving

perseverance includes and builds up lives. It does not exclude and ultimately destroy them.

Long ago Vincent van Gogh was removed by the institutional church from his pulpit as a Calvinist minister because he identified too much with the poor and marginalized he had been sent to serve. He went through a wilderness period to discern his new calling as a painter of the overlooked and marginalized. He persevered in his sense of call but simply changed the way he carried it out.

In the days before South Africa was free, Archbishop Desmond Tutu stood one afternoon in front of the South African Embassy in Washington, DC. He challenged those within the embassy with these words: "Those of you inside -- are you listening? Do you hear me? You have already been defeated. Do you understand that? You have already lost and we on the outside have won. Out here, we know how the struggle for black freedom and liberation will turn out, for God is on the side of the oppressed. It's not; 'We shall win.' Oh No! We have already won! Only you on the inside have not yet realized it. We outsiders have, and we know the future. We are the future."

We all have something that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. That something may change over time but there will never be a time when we are without something that inspires us to be a better person. Sometimes we just need to slow down long enough to discern what it is that is meaningful to each of us.

Whatever it is that gives your life meaning; whether it's working with the homeless; or the workers in our city who are not being paid for the work they do; or supporting the food pantry; or maybe it's your family; your church; your neighborhood school or a school in Africa; the list can go on and on. But whatever your cause, you are called by God to lovingly persist in the pursuit of your dreams of justice. You must not lose faith and you cannot let fear stop you. General Patton once said that "Courage is fear that hung on for a minute longer". As we gather as a community we can find renewed courage and faith by sharing our dreams with each other and supporting each other. The future of our church and our world really does depend on each and every one of us.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*

**St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church** welcomes and affirms all people without regard to race, nationality, age, gender, gender identity, marital status, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, economic or educational class.

We are affiliated with the PC (USA). ([www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org))

We are a More Light congregation. ([www.mlp.org](http://www.mlp.org))

We are an affiliate of The Center for Progressive Christianity. ([www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org))

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
  - believers and agnostics,
  - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
  - women and men,
  - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
  - those of all races and cultures,
  - those of all classes and abilities,
  - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
  - striving for peace and justice among all people,
  - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
  - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

*(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)*



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