

‘The Widow Wins’
A Sermon Preached at Duke Chapel on October 17, 2010
by Rev. Jeremy Troxler
Luke 18: 1-18

*“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart . . .
‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? . . .
And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’”*

Susan Retik and Patti Quigley were each seven months pregnant and picking out the color of the baby’s nursery when their husbands were each killed on the 11th of September, 2001. Suddenly Susan and Patti found themselves widows and single parents, plunged into loneliness and tragedy, trying as best they could to answer the unanswerable questions of their grieving children.

On television the mourning widows watched the unfolding fight in Afghanistan, and learned about the plight of women there. They realized that Afghanistan would soon be full of more widows just like themselves: that in fact Afghanistan was already full of such widows from violence. Susan and Patti had only been able to make it through the past few months because of the overwhelming love and support that surrounded them: otherwise, they might have lost heart. Now, they simply could not imagine a woman going through what they had, while being in a place where you might have little of kind of support that they had.

Imagine, they thought, that you live in one of the poorest countries in the world. You live in a place ravaged by war. You can’t read or write. You have given birth to seven children, but only five lived long enough to learn to walk. You want your children to go to school and have a better life, but the family’s survival depends on your kids working instead, and the nearest girls’ school is a three-hour walk. You are not allowed to go to market without a male escort. If someone assaults you, your best recourse is to keep your mouth shut, because you know that the police and legal system do not support women. Just eating enough everyday is already a struggle. And now, your husband has been killed. With his death you have lost not only a companion, but you have lost what little voice and property and social protection you once had.

You are a widow in Afghanistan.

Susan Retik and Patti Quigley were two widows who had been dealt a grave injustice by this life. But the two widows decided that they would not let their lives be defined by that injustice. They did not lose heart. Together they founded the organization “Beyond the 11th,” which is dedicated to raising funds to support and empower widows in Afghanistan who have been afflicted by war, terror, or oppression. The documentary “Beyond Belief” tells story of how Susan and Patti’s organization began by buying small chicken flocks for women so that they could sell eggs, and of how it has now moved on to found an Afghan Women’s Center and to support over 1000 Afghan widows in starting small businesses.

When life gave them injustice, two tenacious widows gave injustice a black eye. The widows win.

Jesus tells a parable about our need to keep on praying and to not lose heart.

“In a certain city,” he says, “there was a judge who neither feared God or respected people.” The judge was crooked. The judge was shameless. The judge didn’t care what other people thought. He didn’t care what God thought, if he even believed in God. This judge’s decisions bore little resemblance to what was right. He was unfair, unjust.

The judge was perhaps a lot like life in a fallen world. Unfair, unjust.

But in that city with the unjust judge there was this widow – there is this Susan or Patti-type widow who comes to the judge and says, “Grant me justice in my case.” As a widow in that day she was treated like a widow in Afghanistan would be: without a husband anymore she had few legal rights at all. So the unjust judge just smacks down the gavel and shoos her away without hearing her case: maybe because she won’t pay him his standard bribe, maybe because he’s afraid of her more powerful opponent and he knows she’s just a nobody in comparison, maybe because he’s too busy and just doesn’t care about some emotional widow. Either way, the widow is ignored and sent on her way.

Now many of us, if we were in this widow’s shoes in that place and time, we might have lost heart. We might have gone home and licked our wounds. We might have sighed and said, “Life isn’t fair: You can’t fight city hall.” We might have resigned ourselves and tried our best to move on with our lives in an unjust world.

But that’s not what this stubborn widow does! She doesn’t lose heart, she stiffens her backbone. She wakes up in the morning and straightens her jacket, and pulls down her hat, and sets her jaw and with a spring in her step she marches right down to that courthouse. She storms into that courtroom like a tornado, marches right up to the front. The judge in his great big black robe looks over the rim of his glasses down at this poor little woman beneath the bench and says, “You again? What do you want?” And wonder-widow just looks up at him and wags her little index finger in his direction and says, “I want justice, and you’re going to give it me, you hear?” And that little uppity widow causes such a commotion that the bailiffs have to come and drag her out of there kicking and screaming.

But that doesn’t stop her: the very next day, wonder-widow gets up, and she stomps into that courtroom again like she owns the place. She’s marching around and carrying a great big picket sign with the Scripture verses Deuteronomy 10:17-18: “For the LORD your God is LORD of lords . . . (who) is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow.” The judge blushes, throws up his hands, doesn’t know what to do, so he orders the bailiffs to haul her out again. But she comes again the next day wearing a T-shirt that has across the front, “Your Honor Has No Honor.” And she comes again the next day. And the next day. And the next day. Every day. It gets so bad that she gets to know the bailiffs by their first names, asks about their families each time they carry her out, even brings them an apple pie that she baked.

That widow is on that judge like a flea on a dog. She is pushy, she is persistent, she is relentless. Every day, she keeps coming, and coming, blitzing this poor judge. This widow knows life isn’t fair, but that doesn’t mean that she’s just going to roll over and take it. She knows that she may not have a

lawyer, but maybe she's read enough of the Bible to know that God is the public defender of the poor, that there is a lot bigger bench and a lot higher court than this one that is going to eventually make a ruling in this case. So she does not lose heart. She keeps coming, keeps coming, keeps coming, pummeling the unfairness of life and the unfairness of that judge. Finally the poor bludgeoned, black and blue judge decides he has no other choice: he can't put a poor helpless widow in handcuffs and hope to get reelected, even if he does run that attack ad he's working on. And now this pestering widow is making such a public spectacle of shaming him that there are several TV reporters hanging around. So the judge basically says, in the Greek words of this story, "I'm just going to have to give this crazy widow the justice she wants, so she'll stop giving me a black eye."

The widow wins! The widow wins.

Jesus says this parable is about our need to keep on praying, and to not lose heart in seeking justice. It's not, Jesus says, that God is like the unjust judge whom you have to badger into submission or bug to death in order to get any kind of response. In fact it's just the opposite. Jesus says, "If even a **powerless unnamed widow** can get justice from a **corrupt** judge with nothing but **sheer, raw persistence**, imagine how much more quickly justice will be granted when God's BELOVED cry out NIGHT and DAY to the One who IS the JUST and merciful judge, and who longs, who is eager to give the justice they are seeking." "I tell you," Jesus says, "God will quickly, suddenly grant justice to them."

This is a parable about prayer: but the kind of prayer Jesus is talking about here is not some serene supplication that is soothing sedative for the spirit. It is not prayer that helps us accept our situation in life and anesthetize our anxieties. It is not a prayer to enlarge our territory or our bank account. No, the kind of prayer Jesus is talking about is wonder-widow-type prayer, squeaky-wheel prayer, thy-kingdom-come, thy-will-be-done-on-earth prayer, prayer that won't accept anything less than what's right, upper-cut prayer that gives sin and meanness and inhumanity and unfairness a black eye.

Maybe you could say Jesus is talking about persistent, Mother Teresa-type prayer. The great preacher Tom Long tells the story of the day that the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta went to visit prominent Washington lawyer and sports owner Edward Bennett Williams. Mother Teresa was raising money for an AIDS hospice, and the attorney Williams was in charge of a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help. Williams, though, was reluctant: he thought, "I really don't want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, so what do I do?" He decided to hear Mother Teresa out and then politely tell her "No."

Soon enough little Mother Teresa was sitting across the attorney's big mahogany table, a little widow-looking woman in a white sari looking up at the man in gold cufflinks and a designer suit. Mother Teresa talked about the work of the Hospice, and then made her request for help. Williams listened patiently and then said, "Mother, we are very touched by your appeal, and your wonderful work, but unfortunately, the answer has to be "No"." Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." They bowed their heads and she prayed. But Long says that after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same exact pitch for the hospice, word for word, as she had before. Williams again politely said no. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." Edward Bennett Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling and said, "All right, all right, all right, I'll get my checkbook."

“Do justice. Let us pray. Do justice. Let us pray. Do justice, let us pray.” And the widow wins.

For Mother Teresa, and for her Lord, prayer is not the opiate of the people, it’s caffeine for the world-changers. The theologian Karl Barth once wrote that when we clasp our hands in prayer, we are participating in an uprising against the injustice and disorder of the world. A world made right comes not only through the picket line or the protest march or the policy decision, but through the prayer closet. Amid a life where all things are intimately connected with one another, from the country down to the quark, the gift of prayer allows us to cooperate with God in summoning a new future into being.

So keep on praying, Jesus says, don’t lose heart, not even tomorrow: your prayers are heard, and justice is coming. Whatever we may be tempted to think, our prayers for justice do not connect us to some heavenly call center where we are put on hold and assured “Your call is important to us” while we remain eternally stranded in the bureaucracy of blessing. No. Neither does prayer put us at the back of the line of an over-full court docket, where we are treated like a number and our case won’t be heard for months.

Our prayers, our deep heartfelt cries for justice, for what is right, are heard. When a newborn infant cries out for its parents in the middle of the night, her parents jerk immediately awake in the bed, because even in their sleep their ears are attuned to the cries of their child. So too is God attuned to cries of all of God’s children, day or night.

And yet . . . and yet . . . there is the ending of this story. Jesus knows all too well that we live in a fallen, widow-making world that is often an unjust judge, that often seems to neither fear God or respect people, a world in which life is often unfair. It is a world in which there is a mysterious delay between our prayers for justice being heard, and our prayers for justice being answered: we live in that time between the cry in the night and the parent rushing into the nursery. For some, that delay may last until the world to come. That agonizing delay is enough to make us lose heart, perhaps to make us give up on prayer altogether. How long, O LORD?

And that’s why at the end of this parable Jesus, turns that question of “How Long” back around to us. He asks this poignant question that is left hanging in the air: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Will there be anyone audacious enough to simply ask for a better world, to believe that our prayers matter? Will we cry out day and night for the justice this world so desperately needs, that we need – or will we be too busy or sophisticated for that? When the Son of Man comes, will there still be a people who refuse to confuse this world’s “No” with God’s final answer? How long would you wait for rescue, trapped in a mine underground, trusting that you had been heard, believing that others are working for your rescue, above and around you, unseen? Will the Son of Man find anyone as indomitable as a Chilean miner, as that widow, as indomitable as **him**, who won’t stop praying and seeking justice, even if it means a cross?

During the bad old days of apartheid in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was one of the leaders in the church struggle against laws that separated peoples and enshrined inequality. He is also a man of deep prayer: I’ve been told that Archbishop Tutu automatically and unfailing stops what he is doing specific times each day, even if he is in mid-conversation, so that he can pray. Throughout the 1980’s Tutu and a small band of church leaders would pray, and pray, and pray, and then they would

repeatedly march down to the towering government buildings to demand that justice be done. They kept coming, and coming, and coming. There they would be confronted by an imposing phalanx of uniformed government and military officials, many of whom neither feared God nor respected people. Tutu's small group looked like one little old widow in comparison. But Desmond Tutu would wag his finger at his opponents and say, "We want justice, and we believe that one day God will give us that justice. We are inviting you to join the winning side. End apartheid. Come over to the winning side. Because we've read the end of this book, the Bible, and we know who wins!"

In 1991, after a long, seemingly too-long time, and yet after a sudden chain of events that nearly everyone regarded as miraculous, apartheid ended in South Africa. Desmond Tutu was right: the "widows" won.

When the Son of Man comes, will he find such faith on earth?

Will he find such faith in me, in you?

Join the winning side.

Keep on praying.

Give the unjust judges of this world a shiner.

Don't lose heart seeking what's right.

Because we've read the end of this book, and, thanks be to God, we know who wins:

the widow wins!

