

July 20, 2025

Sermon Text Luke 18:1-8 (NLT) Parable of the Persistent Widow

SERMON “Those Women Who Talk Back!”

Before we read today’s sermon scripture, let me give you a few thoughts prior to hearing it:

The sassy, no-holds barred, truth-telling woman – it's a common character in novels, movies and TV sitcoms. Countering the dizzy airhead stereotype, they’re sometimes used as the foil to a clueless male who thinks they’re in charge, thinks they know more than anyone else. These characters speak truth to the power figures in their life, revealing the flaws behind the outer image of someone in authority. Think of Dorothy Gale, in the movie “The Wizard of Oz,” saying “Why, you're nothing but a Humbug!” Maria in “The Sound of Music,” telling Captain Von Trapp that he better stop and listen to her if he wants to keep himself in the hearts of his children. Katniss Everdeen in “The Hunger Games,” not falling to fear and assertively staking out her strategy to survive the vicious and cruel tendencies that come out of her competitors. And there is Elizabeth Bennet in “Pride and Prejudice,” and the Disney character Mulan, representing women who are ready to push back on societies’ dictates and others' opinion of what is best for them.

Throughout the Bible, many women in unexpected situations with unexpected responses are shared. In Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist and Mary, the young mother of Jesus, we see women being placed in roles that defy the expectations of the world of first century Palestine. Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching, placed herself in a role normally reserved for men. And there are the examples of women talking back, challenging Jesus, questioning him. The story of the Samaritan woman at the well, replying to Jesus “Why are you asking me for a drink, an enemy of the Jewish people?” And “How can you provide better water than a well that has served these people for generations?” The book of Luke shares many of Jesus’ interactions with women, their willingness to reach out and ask, challenge, revealing the God through the incarnated Christ who came for all. And so, it’s not surprising that Jesus himself told a story of a woman, to teach a multi-layered lesson. In his parable, we can hear many different challenges to our faith and the ways we approach our relationship with God. Let’s listen now to

that parable, “The Parable of the Persistent Widow” from Luke 18:1-8 from the New Living Translation:

18 One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. 2 “There was a judge in a certain city,” he said, “who neither feared God nor cared about people. 3 A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, ‘Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.’ 4 The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, ‘I don’t fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I’m going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!’”

6 Then the Lord said, “Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. 7 Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don’t you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will grant justice to them quickly! But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?”

The first interpretation of Jesus’ teaching through this parable is pretty clear: it’s about prayer. The author of this gospel, Luke, makes sure we start out with this interpretation by adding in his own preface to the parable: “One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should *always pray* and *never give up*.” These aren’t Jesus’ words, but the writer’s. Luke makes his interpretation of Jesus’ teaching very clear by following up immediately after this parable with a second one about prayer – which we’ll look at next week. So in Luke’s version of Jesus’ life, he clearly wants us to see within this parable our relationship to God through the conversation we have with our divine Father. It encourages consistency going back to God in communication. Perseverance. Honesty about saying what we think we need and lifting it to the divine.

Jesus ended this parable by saying: “If even the unjust judge finally listens, don’t you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night?” We see this affirmed in Jesus’ own example. Jesus prayed without ceasing, he regularly set aside time to be in conversation with God. He shared his needs and wants and fears with God in the wilderness being tempted. And he continued this practice to the end, preparing for his time of suffering and death in the Garden of Gethsamane. It’s not surprising that one important lens of interpretation of this parable is prayer.

So why interrogate this story further? Isn't it only about prayer? As we've seen, parables are stories that, like good literature, have multiple layers of meaning. Often in parables, the teaching comes from their surprise twists – plot lines that take an unexpected turn, characters that don't quite fit expectations. So another layer of meaning in this story is the characters don't follow the expectations of the disciples of Jesus, or our expectations today. This parable has a lesson about overcoming those stereotypes.

The first stereotype is the expected behavior of judges. In the Book of Judges in the Old Testament, they were people who were prophets considered wise, looking out for the interest of the community, most of them of solid moral character (well, Samson was an exception to this one) So Jesus' listeners would have heard someone labeled "judge" and have first assumed good qualities in them. But that's not the judge in Jesus' story. We're told this one doesn't use faith consistently to guide his decisions. He doesn't believe in God, and he couldn't care less about neighbor. He can't be shamed into considering anything other than his own opinion and agenda. We aren't told why he refuses the claim of the widow – maybe a rich person gave him a luxury vacation to look the other way? Maybe someone funded his children's education? We're left to ponder – what was this woman up against? And yet, he finally cares about his status, how he looks in the eyes of some people. He finally gives in to the woman's constant visits and pleas and demands – the literal translation is "he doesn't want to get a black eye" by her public outcry. He's sick and tired of hearing her AND having to explain himself publicly. So, he gives in. Not what the listeners in front of Jesus would want in a good judge. Not what we expect or want today.

The widow also busts stereotypes. The story trail that characterizes widows as poor, alone, needing an advocate to get them what they need, is woven throughout the Bible. Think of Naomi from the Story of Ruth. Think of the widow of Zarephath in the book of 1 Kings, who survives a drought and famine and whose son is raised from the dead by the interventions of the prophet Elijah. Even after Jesus' death, the apostles forming the early church had to intervene on the treatment of the widows of the converted Gentiles, overcoming favored treatment being given to those that came to faith from their Jewish upbringing and practice. Widows were one of the vulnerable in this patriarchal society where the political and economic structures of that time were created to keep men in power and women were often not heard. So, throughout the writings gathered in the sacred text of the Bible, we are also told to be part of the solution to their vulnerable status in the societies believers live in. Deuteronomy 10: 18

says preferential treatment should be given, that “God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves strangers, providing them food and clothing.” Later in Deuteronomy 27, it states God requires the economic care for the “alien, the orphan, and the widow,” and includes the threat: “Cursed be anyone who deprives the (resident) alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.” Jeremiah equates oppressing the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow to the shedding of innocent blood, equating it to murder. In the writings of the prophets Ezekial, Zechariah, Malachi, and in the Psalms, widows/orphans and strangers/foreigners were all lumped together as having special status with God in the neighbors we are called to care for.

But there are several women characters in the Bible who punch back at their vulnerability. Tamar is one of them. Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Jacob’s son Judah, fought for herself – even resorting to deception – when her legal rights to a Levirate marriage and the opportunity to have children were denied. And when Judah threatened to shut up, she threatened to go public – give Judah a “black eye” socially – if he didn’t do what the law required. Tamar didn’t wait around for someone to be her protector. Because the men who were supposed to protect her by law had failed her. So she took matters into her own hands and made sure she got what she needed.

We see stereotypes are busted in Jesus’ parable of the persistent widow – a judge, someone who should care for the interests of everyone, doesn’t fulfill that expectation; a widow, part of a group that were often oppressed/overlooked/uncared for, takes matters into her own hands by advocating for herself until she finally get what she needs. In this overturning of expectations of these characters, we see hope for justice in the reversal of fortunes. Of the downtrodden finally being heard, the weak finding their own strength by speaking up, speaking out.

Finally, there’s a third meaning that can also be drawn from the Parable of the Persistent Widow. This message requires seeing within her actions, and Jesus’ affirming that persistence, the God-gifted permission we are all given *to question*.

Jesus said in his story: “A widow of that city came to him *repeatedly*, saying, ‘Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.’ In her actions is this implication: she didn’t take no for an answer. She didn’t assume that her need wasn’t valid; she did shut up when she was told to go away. Something kept her from just taking the first, or second or third, answer that she was given – and she questioned the decision handed down to her. In questioning the judge’s refusal to give her justice, she challenged the power structures of her time. She didn’t

just dismiss what her own reasoning, her own experience, told her was correct, was fair. So she questioned the judge's decision by returning repeatedly with her need. She may not have been questioning his authority – but she wouldn't stop asking for what she needed, questioning the decision.

Jesus ends his parable by affirming the nature of God. This isn't the only teaching that compares a loving, nurturing God to the actions of human authority. Jesus had posed to his listeners "What father, who loves his children, gives them a snake? Therefore, how much more so will your good Father in heaven give you what you need." And this comparative method is being used by Jesus to explain this parable – don't think God is like this judge. We should know the God that has chosen us – his love, his mercy and compassion. Jesus modeled God's love for us; it reveals itself consistently throughout the Bible. So – if this judge, who did not operate out of love of God and love of neighbor finally listened to the widow and answered her request, Jesus points out how much more so will God listen, God respond to our needs. To act any differently is to deny the love God has for his creation. To act any differently is to deny God's willingness to hear our questioning, and to shift the course of events based on our expressed needs.

We have evidence of God's willingness to be questioned throughout the Bible. In Genesis 18, we are told the story of Abraham's conversation with God, and the intervention he made for God's plan to be shifted. When God told him of his plan to destroy two cities, Abraham responded by questioning God: "Will you sweep away both the righteous and the unrighteous? ... Should not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?" From there, Abraham continued to question; when God said he would not destroy a city if he could find 50 righteous people in it, Abraham kept coming back – well, then what if there were 45? If you'd show mercy in that case, well, what about 40? 30? This conversation continued back and forth until we are told that finally Abraham said "Lord, please don't be angry with me if I speak out one more time. Suppose only ten are found there?" And God in this story in the Old Testament says, for the sake of the ten, he would not destroy the cities. Abraham's petitions to God, his questioning God about mercy, shifted God's plan.

There are many more examples of humans questioning their Creator, asking God, "what if?" "How?" "Why?" The Psalms are prayers that often lift up the human questioning of God. The Psalmist in Psalm 44 writes "Wake up, O Lord! Why do you sleep?" Psalm 88: "O Lord, why do you reject me? Why do you turn your face away from me?" And Psalm 22, the words Jesus repeated in his suffering on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are

you so far away when I groan for help?” Just like the example of the persistent widow, we have examples throughout the Bible that give us permission to be completely honest with God in our prayer, including questioning God. Our “why’s” don’t always get answered in the way we want, but God’s love allows the questions. Thus, questioning God is NOT a lack of faith; questioning God is evidence of our faith, trusting God will hear us and respond to us when it aligns with our loving God’s will.

The Parable of the Persistent Widow encourages us to listen to its messages: to keep praying without ceasing; to not give in to stereotypes; and to question each other and even God. Pray isn’t a task list for God that we hand off to God for our sole benefit. Every prayer is answered, but – not always in the way we think is best in our limited vision of God’s purpose and will for our lives. Even in Abraham’s petitions, the delay in destroying the city that came about in the story of his intervention with God did not change the end to those cities’ story. In the end, God’s will was done in a different way than Abraham may have envisioned in his mind.

And so for us, the challenge of the persistent widow reminds us: our thoughts are not God’s thoughts; what we express as a need may be answered very differently than what we imagine. But keep asking; keep questioning. We have a big God; God has shown he can hold up under questioning.

Amen.