

## **The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease?**

**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**

**[sermon germination group: Vince Cheverine, Karen Dakin,  
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**Text: Luke 18:1-8**

Among the essential tenets of Reformed Faith is the affirmation of “the priesthood of all believers.” Martin Luther and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation came to believe that the role of priest as intermediary between God and humanity was not a true reflection of Biblical teaching. Jesus Christ had reconciled humanity to God, and therefore all were able to approach the throne of grace directly, in prayer and at the Lord’s Table. They did not need a priest to stand—literally and symbolically—between them and the Divine. I had to whip out this argument while talking to my brother recently. I was enthusiastically describing how a different group of Fairmounters meets with me each month, to read and discuss a biblical text that will provide the basis of an upcoming sermon. “Their insights and perspectives really illuminate the Scripture!” I said. My brother was not impressed: “I thought that’s what they pay you for.” Well, yes. But we do faith a disservice if we place all responsibility and authority for biblical interpretation and theological reflection into the hands of professional clergy. The best sermons are ones that reflect the shared conversation of the whole congregation; the struggles we face, the diverse experiences and realities we have—and how all that helps us hear in ancient words of Scripture, God’s living Word to us. The sermon germination process is one way to demonstrate the priesthood of all believers, and I will tell you I’m impressed with the theologians and Bible interpreters we have in this church. (If you think you might like to participate in one of the groups, please let me know—I love volunteers and there is always room at the table!) In a way, it’s like the difference between watching a playoff game on television and actually being at the Jake. On television, you get the professional announcer and color

commentator, instant replays, and close-up shots. What you miss is the feeling of “being there,” of being immersed in the action, caught up in the crowd, drawn into the drama. There’s nothing like it!

SO.....won’t you right now pull up a [8:30 chair][11...pew], crack open the New Testament portion of the Bible to page 81 and get in the game? A reading from the gospel according to Luke in the eighteenth chapter, at the first verse. Listen for God’s word to the Church. [LUKE 18:1-8]

The title for today’s sermon came as an almost immediate response from the sermon germination group that discussed this gospel reading. It’s practically a contemporary paraphrase of the first verse: *Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.* This is familiar territory to us, right? The squeaky wheel gets the grease. If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. Ever tried nagging as a method to get your way? Have you given in to someone (often someone under the age of 21) because you simply got tired of being bombarded with their constant pleading? Keep on praying for what you want and eventually God will be persuaded to grant it.

It’s reasonable to summarize the story just that way: we’ve got a woman seeking justice (though one in the group pointed out the irony of seeking justice from an “unjust” judge). She’s a widow; in biblical times, “widows, orphans and aliens” were placeholders for the most vulnerable of a society; the ones most likely to be in need, and the ones whose protection God particularly commanded. Clearly here she is without spouse, adult children, friend, or attorney to speak for her. So she goes to court alone to plead her case. Again, and again, and again. Nothing. No justice. No relief. No peace. And we’ve got a judge—whose arrogance is noted by his lack of regard for either God or his fellow human beings. Nonetheless, he finally grants the widow justice, just so she won’t wear him out by continually bringing her case before him. Alert readers saw the footnote referencing the phrase “I will grant her justice so

that she may not wear me out by continually coming--" it's more literally translated "I will grant her justice so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face." This is no sweet, slightly flummoxed Aunt Bee. There's a kind of desperation in her continual pleading. Desperation that has galvanized her to take action. This widow looks like Cindy Sheehan demanding justice for her son killed in a questionable war.....or Jim Wallis of Sojourners demanding that concern for the poor figure in the national political scene and presidential campaigns. Persistent. In your face. Someone who won't stop until they're satisfied. It's not too hard to read this parable as a description of the kind of faith God requires of those who would pray for justice.

Yet sometimes-- in the face of disappointment, the times when injustice seems to prevail, the times when God feels far away-- it's hard *not* to lost heart. God may bring justice 'quickly' as the text says, but 'quickly' to us may not be 'quickly' in God's timing. And the group wondered whether the heart would take much courage in the exhortation simply to "hang in there" unless there's a reason for it. Something else is needed, in order to grow the faith necessary to persist in the face of difficulty. That may not be so much an ideal of "justice" as it is an understanding of God's faithfulness 24/7. God doesn't have to be "nagged" to grant justice. That's not the purpose of prayer. Prayer strengthens *human* faith; it enlarges our capacity to trust God regardless of immediate outcomes. Despite evidence to the contrary all around us, the God to whom we pray is a God of justice. Martin Luther King Jr. inspired the weary with a God-given dream of freedom and equality: "the arc of human history bends long," he acknowledged, "but it always bends toward justice."

Do you believe it? The group noticed that the last part of this text is a series of questions Jesus put to the crowd. *Will not God grant justice? Will he delay long? Will the Son of Man find faith on earth?* As happens so often in Jesus' teaching, the ball is back in the listener's court. Jesus seems to have wanted them (and us!) to consider our trust in God, here on earth,

where it matters. After all, we won't need faith in heaven, where all will be revealed. We are called to pray continually for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done *on earth as it is in heaven*. The parable provides more than encouragement to keep the faith. It gives us reason to believe: in a God who won't rest until all injustice is overcome.

I couldn't get the group's stirring summary of this text out of my mind in the ensuing month. The conversation had shifted the accent away from a contrast between the unjust judge and God. The God they affirmed sounded a whole lot like the widow in this story. God: making the case for justice and truth again and again and again. God: prevailing against every resistance we humans throw up. God: in passionate pursuit of those are indifferent to either the call of God or the needs of others. God: sending prophets and teachers and apostles and even the son Jesus Christ to bring forth the justice of God's realm.

Come to find out, God is more stubborn than we are! God's love perseveres in spite of our fitful faith and casual indifference; in spite of life's unfairness. God's annoying persistence will win the day. Justice will prevail.

So God continues to come to us to make the case. And maybe this means our greatest need in praying is not so much to put forth our agenda time and time again. Perhaps our greatest need is to listen, to hear what God is saying to us, to discern what God is calling us to do to set things right on earth. Finally, that's why we had to pose the title of the sermon as a question. Will we grease the squeaky wheel crying out for justice? Is there enough faith here to persist in truth and goodness? Jesus said even faith the size of a tiny mustard seed can move mountains. A single drop of water when consistently applied can carve rock, can shape and transform even the hardest, most unpromising reality. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian and Christian thinker who resisted the Nazi movement in Germany, did not get to witness its defeat and the triumph of freedom; he was executed days

before the Allies liberated Germany. Even in prison he was animated by hope and purpose. “The essence of optimism,” he wrote, “is that it takes no account of the present, but is determined by the future God has willed. It becomes a source of inspiration, of vitality and hope where others have resigned.” [from *Letters and Papers from Prison*] For Bonhoeffer, the conviction that God rules gave him the courage to act, to take on responsibility for righting the wrongs of his day.

I see echoes of that essential optimism every day in you...ones who lovingly and patiently care for an ill spouse or parent....ones who untiringly volunteer to teach our youngest members about God’s love...ones who relentlessly pursue a vision of a revitalized and thriving city....ones who pray fervently for peace again and again and again. O friends, do not lose heart! Let our actions reflect the truth that we all belong to a good and gracious God, who is with us always. Let our church testify to the certainty of God’s justice. And let us together leave no doubt that the Son of Man will find faith on earth, today and tomorrow.

**NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.**

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