

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

### Proper 24C – October 19, 2025

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Psalms 119:97-104

2Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

### The Widow Persisted

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at  
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*

Jesus said, “pray always and do not lose heart”... and to put an exclamation upon that instruction, Jesus said, “I am going to tell you about a woman who had superpowers, a woman who seemed to have the justice system and all odds for success stacked high against her... a woman who, nonetheless, prevailed by showing up day after day after day. By wielding her grit and undaunted persistence, the widow succeeded against an unjust judge and an unjust system.” Today we look to this tenacious woman as a model for us... as we, in our moment... may be feeling as though discouragement is nipping at our heels... and as though our spirits are running on fumes. Today, Jesus is lifting up an unnamed widow... who had nothing to lose... as one with the power to show us the way.

In the ancient world, there were, indeed, widows of wealth and means. The widow in today’s lesson, however, was more likely a woman who lived on the margins of society. In Hebrew, the word for ‘widow’ literally means ‘one who is unable to speak’... a ‘silent one.’ In the ancient Mediterranean world, men were the ones to speak in public and call the shots. Women did not speak for themselves. This audacious widow, however, dared to speak up. Though we don’t know the specifics of the widow’s actual complaint, we do know that the woman was seeking justice against an opponent. Maybe the words of her mother... told to her long ago... urged her on. Maybe a deep hunger and thirst for justice fortified her. No matter the reasons or the motivations... we are presented with a parable about the power of gritty persistence with the message: “pray always and do not lose heart”... a message about active prayer and active persistence in the world.

The message “pray always and do not lose heart” sounds easier said than done. How do we go about praying always? What does that look like? And the ‘not losing heart’ part of the message sounds like a huge assignment that requires more than will and determination. Jesus’ instruction seems a bit like spotting a photo of a sumptuous dessert... but the recipe for the dessert has no listing of ingredients, no amounts, no step-by-step instructions for making the dessert. “Do not lose heart.” How do we get from there to there? Our assignment is to envision the goal of “not losing heart,” and then find our way into practices of “praying always” that fortify us for our work in the world. Jesus was not instructing his followers to drop everything and do nothing but pray... but he was pointing out that prayer... and the superpower of persistence... are linked. To be persistent in the practice of prayer offers fortitude for the long haul... and when I say “prayer,” I imagine that we might well, collectively, have a vast potpourri of ideas about what prayer looks like.

Do you know what the most frequently prayed prayer is? I will give you a hint: it is one word. For the grief-stricken, the traumatized, the downtrodden, the soldier in the trenches, and many, many others, the simple prayer “HELP!” is very likely being offered up by believers and nonbelievers

alike... at this very moment. Sometimes the simplest of prayers is the plea to understand “WHY?” Why did this happen? How do I make sense of a situation that makes no sense? Another common approach to prayer is praying the wants list... beseeching God to answer our prayers by fulfilling the specific needs, desires and petitions we offer up like a shopping list. Silent prayer offers us an invitation to listen for God’s still, small voice. One time, during an interview, Mother Teresa was asked about her prayer, about what she said to God when she prayed. Mother Teresa replied, “I don’t talk. I just listen.” The interviewer then asked, “And what does God say to you?” Mother Teresa answered, “Oh, God just listens, too.” Sometimes the answer to prayer is precisely what we asked for, sometimes the response is loud silence. Maybe a response will be granted in God’s good time. There are many approaches to prayer. Let me tell you a story about the moment my understanding of prayer deepened profoundly.

In seminary, I took a class on the writings of Howard Thurman who was a follower of the teachings of Ghandi, a leader in the civil rights movement, a mentor to The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and founder of the Church for All People in San Francisco. Thurman was an author, a mystic, a philosopher and a theologian. Those of us who have participated in a Sacred Ground Group... the Episcopal Church’s program offering information and education on the history of racism for the sake of healing deep seeded wounds in our country... those of us who are Sacred Ground alumni may well have read some of Dr. Thurman’s work, particularly his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. During an evening class on Howard Thurman’s writings, I remember sitting in a circle of chairs in the Fireside Room... listening to an audio tape of Dr. Thurman speaking on the topic of prayer. Though he had died at least a decade earlier, his simple words, spoken in a deep lush voice, fell deep down into me and reconfigured my whole understanding of prayer. The message was both simple and profound. I can still hear Thurman’s deep rich voice saying, slowly: “Prayer... changes... us.” “Prayer... changes... us.” If we consider that prayer changes us... then Jesus’ directive to, “pray always and not lose heart” takes on a deeper meaning... for if we are changed... then what?

Let us be clear... the judge in this story is not meant to represent God. The God we know is not stubborn, unjust, or one who is vulnerable to being worn down and relenting simply because of being annoyed by pesky persistence. Jesus is in no way saying that our God is one of judgement, or is a punisher, or is malleable in anyway. In this parable, Jesus is shining a spotlight on the widow as a champion. ...and if we believe that prayer changes us, imagine how the practice of persistent prayer has the power to transform us. The form of prayer may vary, but it is the rhythm of prayer, a practice of prayer that has even greater power to do its good work in us.

The invitation to make prayer a “practice” is powerful. Our Muslim friends have a practice of praying five times a day. Buddhists call their meditation a practice, a time of silence set apart one or more times a day. Hindus have a practice of chanting. The power of these varied forms of prayer are compounded by a routine, a rhythm, a welcome dedication to a prayer practice. What this practice looks like may vary. It may be as simple as pausing periodically to listen, or to give thanks, or simply to be still. It may be a practice of Morning Prayer, contemplative prayer, or Compline. Spoken or silent thanksgiving around a dinner table... or before taking that first sip of a morning beverage... especially when done as a dedicated practice... has power to do its work in us. The practice of family prayer is important in the spiritual development of children. A practice of prayer can begin slowly... but beware!... the practice of prayer has the power to draw us in further as we approach, as John Philip Newell writes, “the heartbeat of God.”

“Pray always and do not lose heart.” Jesus underlines the message by showing us a widow who persisted in believing that justice would one day be hers... even when the odds looked wretched. I pray that we may all keep the faith and be blessed by and grow in the practice of prayer... a practice that promises to fortify us for the work we have been given to do as followers of the one who came to show us the Way. We pray, and then we get to work.

*Amen...*