

# Prayer, Justice and Persistent Hope

Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese

Luke 18:1-8

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When she learned of the death threats against her, Malala Yousafzai thought about how she would respond if a Talib came to kill her. She first thought she would hit him with her shoe, but then she thought, "If you hit a Talib, then there would be no difference between you and the Talib. You must not treat others with cruelty...you must fight others through peace and through dialogue and through education. I would tell him how important education is and that I would even want education for your children as well. I would say that's what I want to tell you, now do what you want." That is what Malala Yousafzai told Jon Stewart on The Daily Show, something that left him speechless, and reminds me of the strength, persistence and courage of the widow in our scripture text for today.

The scripture passage for today and the story of Malala Yousafzai are stories of women--young and old--who stand up for justice in the face of unjust power. One of the core principles of Judaism was the care of widows and orphans. The passage for today is a parable about a widow who repeatedly brings her case before a judge. We are told the judge "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Most of our western translations give us the idea that this judge does not care about others, and that is certainly the effect of his actions. However, in the Middle East, the word we translate as "had no respect for" is always translated "does not feel shame". In a shame-honour culture, one doesn't refrain from doing things because they are wrong, but because they are shameful. This judge has no inner sense of what is right and what is shameful. He cannot be shamed; "he is hurting a destitute widow. He should feel shame." (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, p. 132)

This is a judge who does not fear God, and who feels no shame with regard to his actions. He is a very difficult man, and there is only one thing that will influence him, and that is bribery. To this kind of person, the widow comes. In the OT, the widow is the symbol of innocent, powerless oppression. Isaiah 1:17 says the rulers and the people need to "plead for the widow." On this basis, legal suits involving widows took priority, and the widow in this

parable had legal rights that were being violated. The disciples hearing this parable would have known that. She was too weak to compel the judge, and too poor to bribe him. The Middle Eastern listener would have heard this parable and thought: the widow is in the right and is being denied justice; and the judge doesn't want to serve her for some reason, maybe because she doesn't have money to bribe him; (ibid, p. 133)

So we have a powerless widow, and a judge who knows no shame. We know she must be desperate because she ventures into the domain of men. In that culture and that time, women did not go to court--that was a man's world. The courtroom was a noisy, chaotic place where those with a case they wanted heard, crowded around the judge and shouted their case, hoping to get the judge's attention. The more prudent ones whispered to one of the secretaries surrounding the judge, passed on some money, and the secretary would then approach the judge, who would declare which case would be heard first. The presence of a woman in court would indicate that there was no male to bring her case and speak for her, further emphasizing her total helplessness. (ibid, p. 134)

And so the widow comes and speaks, again and again and again, until the judge is so fed up and irritated that he says, "Alright, already, you're giving me a headache! I'll give you what you want! Just stop bugging me!" The implication for the disciples is that if even this widow, who has nothing--no power, no status--can go up against a cruel and heartless judge and have her needs met, how much more will God, who is merciful and compassionate, hear and meet the needs of those who call on God.

This message comes to the disciples at a time when they were questioning and wondering when God's kingdom would come. In the verses preceding this parable, Jesus told them of the time of difficulty that was ahead--that the day of the Son of Man would come but first he must suffer and be rejected by the people. Jesus references the days of Noah, how people were eating, drinking and getting married right up until the flood came. Or the people of Sodom, buying, selling, planting and building right up until Lot left, and then fiery flames came down from the sky. So it will be when the Son of Man appears. Those who try to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives will save them. 2 people will be sleeping in the same bed and one

will be taken and one left. 2 women will be grinding wheat together, and 1 will be taken and 1 left. These are unsettling times, Jesus is telling them, and in the midst of this turmoil, pay attention to the widow, whose persistent hope and cries for justice are eventually heard.

The world has heard the cries for justice from Malala Yousafzai, a 16 year old Pakistani girl who has been actively speaking out for the rights of girls and all children to receive an education. She started writing an anonymous blog when she was 11 years old, telling the world about the bombing of schools, and the ban on education for girls. Following that blog, she began speaking out more publicly. In 2012, she learned that the Taliban had issued a death threat against her, and couldn't believe they were threatened by a child. She thought it must be meant for her father, who ran a school and allowed girls to attend. But, in fact, the death threat was for her, and on October 9, 2012, when she was 15 years old, armed Taliban boarded a school bus and shot her and 2 other girls on the bus. All of them survived, and Malala is continuing to speak out for the rights of girls to receive an education. There is a renewed call from the Taliban for her death. She, along with her family, is living in England, where she went to receive medical treatment after the shooting. Malala was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize this year, has addressed the UN on the right to education, and has said she will continue to speak out for girls and children.

Malala, a child, a modern day image of powerlessness, is speaking to the Taliban powers, indeed to the world powers, about the right of all children to receive education. The Taliban so far seem to know no shame, as the world watches, and they renew their call for her death. She is a modern day example of the persistent widow. On the day she was shot, she says that weakness, fear and hopelessness died and strength, courage and fervour were born.

Malala and the widow remind us that prayer takes many forms, but in all its forms, it requires persistence. It is easy for us to take issue with this parable if we think it is about God answering our prayers in the way we want. We all know that that is not the way it is. Many times, our prayers appear to be unanswered; many people who prayed fervently and faithfully for healing did not experience a physical cure. God's time and God's answers do not always fit into our vision of how things should be.

I think this parable is about justice and faithfulness; it is about persistence and hope that in continually bringing our prayers before God, we are being faithful; and doing so is an act of justice, a way of standing in solidarity with those who suffer; it is participating "in the coming of the reign of God. By praying continually and not giving up hope, we live in the surety that God has not abandoned this world." (*Feasting on the Word*, Kimberly Bracken Long, Pastoral Perspective, p. 190).

The work of justice is difficult and seemingly unending. It involves prayer, and sometimes speaking out in the midst of an inhospitable situation. That work involves using whatever power is at hand--for the widow, it was trusting that even though she had nothing, she was a woman, and her culture respected women, so she used that little bit of power to persist in bringing forth her case. Malala uses the power she has as an articulate young person, and she is using the connections she now has forged in order to get her message across. We can use the power we have to participate in the work of justice that is ushering in the reign of God.

God, through scripture has given us a picture of what that reign looks like. That vision can inspire us toward hope, as we persist in our prayers. But sometimes, we need rituals and the presence of others to help sustain us and encourage us. This morning, we want to offer you anointing for your persistent participation in God's reign. Perhaps your persistence is in the form of prayer and action for peace and wholeness for yourself or someone you love. Perhaps your persistence is in the form of prayer and action for peace and wholeness in places in our community and our world where there is poverty, unemployment, violence. Perhaps your persistence is in the form of prayer and action for peace and wholeness in your school or your workplace. Perhaps your persistence is in the form of prayer and action for peace and wholeness for a burden that you carry alone.

Whatever form your persistence takes, you are invited--all of you, children, youth and adults alike--to come and receive anointing, either on the back of your hand or on your palm, for the work of justice in which you are persisting.

As you are anointed, may you receive the assurance that God stands with you in your prayer, and that God hears your prayer. May your participation in this ritual be your affirmation that you have not given up hope, but that you trust in God's mission of peace and wholeness for each of us and our world. We trust in God's mission, we stand before God with our prayers, and we live in hope that God's reign will come.

**Prayer:**

All power, honour, glory be to you, O God!  
You...sometimes hidden, silent, absent, unresponsive.  
We are so privileged that we seldom sense you  
                  hidden, silent, absent, unresponsive.  
But we know people who do,  
                  we think of places where you do not appear.  
We imagine you defeated,  
                  weak,  
                  held captive.  
And we wait a day,  
                  two days,  
                  until the third day.  
And then, most often then,  
                  quite reliably then,  
                  you appear in your full glory.  
This day we pray [with oil] against your absence, silence, and hiddenness,  
                  [and toward your reign of justice, compassion and mercy.]  
Come with full power into deathly places,  
                  and we will praise you deep and full. Amen.

(adapted from Walter Brueggeman, *Awed to heaven, Rooted in earth*, p. 41)