

Sermon for Proper 24C  
St. John's, Gloucester  
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There are many pictures of God in the Bible: God as Creator, God as smoke or fire, God as king, mother hen, shepherd, farmer. And there are many pictures of Christ's followers in the Bible: disciples, that is, students, apostles, that is, people who are sent out, sheep, preachers, servants, people-fishers. But in today's Gospel, Jesus gives us two pretty unfavorable images—images of God and of God's people.

God is compared to a corrupt judge, and the disciples are exhorted to be like an annoying widow. Do you want to be like an annoying widow? Jesus says, Go for it!

Here's the picture: There is a widow who was wronged in some way. Perhaps she was robbed, or fell prey to a phone scam. Perhaps she had a greedy landlord, who unfairly had her evicted from her apartment. Or someone ran her down and refused to pay for her hospital bills. Widows at that time were particularly vulnerable people. They didn't own property, didn't work outside the home, and without a husband were often poor and marginalized. They didn't have power. As they grew older they were less likely to be remarried. So we probably have an older, poor woman who has been further wounded by injustice.

On the other side, we have a corrupt judge. This would have been a Jewish religious person in charge of settling disputes between Jews, a position of power and respect in the community. But this individual is selfish and corrupt, caring only for himself and his reputation, with no regard for the people he was to serve and no regard for God. There are plenty of examples in these times of politicians or judges who are supposed to be representing the interests of the people they serve, but instead seem set on further oppressing the already marginalized. So we have a well-off, powerful, egotistical judge pitted against a poor, powerless, vulnerable widow. She takes her case to the judge and is relentless in asking that justice be done for her. Surely after trying a few times, she must have been aware that he wasn't paying any attention to her. Surely she realized that he was corrupt. And yet, she kept after him, day after day.

Eventually, because of her persistence, the judge gives in and grants her request. Not because he cared about her or about God or about justice, but because she wore him down. Actually, the Greek words say that she "will give me a black eye," that is, if he doesn't grant her request, his reputation will be stained. The powerless one gets the one with power to do the right thing.

So Jesus charges us to be like the annoying widow, keeping after God in prayer as the widow keeps after the unjust judge. As pastor Meda Stamper points out (Commentary on Luke 18:1-8, the Text this Week), prayer is a huge theme in Luke's Gospel, as is the exhortation to be consistent and persistent in prayer. And many of the shining examples of faithful prayer are from widows—the prophetess Anna in the temple after Jesus' birth, the widow whose son died, Mary the mother of Jesus. These poor, vulnerable people are prophetic, faithful, persistent women, powerful in prayer. Calling on a powerful God to come and be present.

And God? No, God is not a corrupt judge. God is only compared to the judge in this way—even the corrupt judge, who has no regard for humans or the divine, will eventually grant the request of the persistent, annoying widow. **How much more** will God respond to people crying out for justice, since God cares for God's people, and loves justice, and wants to bring peace and goodness to the world.

Jesus says, "Be persistent in prayer. Never give up. Trust that God will give you what is best for you." He doesn't say that God will give us whatever we want, but when you pray earnestly and constantly to God, God will respond by sending the Holy Spirit, by bringing justice, and by building God's kingdom, God's presence, on earth.

But, he concludes, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will he find a people who are persistent in prayer, asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, seeking justice, seeking to build a community of God-fired people?

Now is a very good time to commit to persistent prayer. I hope that you pray in some form at least once a day every day. Take time to pray for help and guidance, whatever you need in your life. Pray for family and friends, for whatever their particular needs are. Prayer can also be a wordless thing, letting yourself become still and quiet and allowing God to be present and speak to you. There is no downside to opening more space in your life for prayer.

There are challenges and difficulties in every age, but we seem to be in a time of accelerating upheaval, transition, chaos and even violence. As part of the "Fostering Imagination" program that this parish is part of, our visioning team showed up to the BTS Center's Convocation, which was titled "Imagination and Liberation in a Climate-Changed World." Not that climate change is something in the future—it's already here. Heat waves, violent storms like Hurricane Ian, communities losing land to rising seas, devastating wildfires—this is our reality. And it's not just weather—the political climate, the economic climate, the workplace—these are all changed or changing. How do we adapt, and how do we find or create hope and meaning when everything is shifting?

It's a great time to commit to persistent prayer. What could be a more honest prayer than, "God, I don't know what to do—show me"? Or "God, nurture gratitude in me every day, no matter what else is happening" or even, "Here I am. Send me. Use me. In whatever way will create the most good—the most joy or most justice."

And pray for St. John's. We've been through quite a journey this last year. You all are stepping out in faith, believing that this church has a mission and a future, even though we're not yet sure what that will look like. The wardens sent off the profile and job posting materials this week so the regional canon can open the search for a full-time priest-in-charge. It's a great time for persistent prayer—that the right candidate is drawn to St. John's AND that the parish continues in its work of developing relationships in the community, taking imaginative risks, and discerning new paths for mission. Keep praying.

Today is the kick-off of our pledge drive. The theme is “More than Enough.” It takes faith, and it takes prayer grounded in the abundance of God, to believe that whatever happens, we have or will be given more than enough.

We’re giving each household \$10 as an exercise in faith and imagination. What good could you do with a mere \$10? How could you build relationship or bring joy or make the world better with it? How could you do something great for the community that you live in? Hint—you could list all the ideas you can think of and pick one. Or you could enlist family members or friends in the project—who knows, they might add their own \$10? Ask God for guidance, and maybe a “multiplication of loaves and fishes” kind of experience. Pray about it!

We want each of you to pledge—whether you have a great abundance of money or are only getting by—everyone has something to offer. Because pledging support of St. John’s is an act of faith, a spiritual discipline. Especially if what you give every week or every month is backed by your prayers for St. John’s, for the Cape Ann communities, for the climate-changed world we live in. Give whatever you can to be used by God—your life, your prayers, your money. And trust that God is active and present, able to provide more than enough, even in times like these.

So, are you ready? Can you be like the annoying widow, a person of faith, and strength, and powerful persistence, calling upon God day by day, believing that God will answer? Will the Son of Man find faith on earth, and in his church?

Let us pray. Amen.