

October 16, 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [September 28, 2016](#) issue

I have to confess at the start that the parable of the persistent widow baffles me. It raises more questions than it answers. Are we really expected to pester God in prayer the way the widow pesters the judge? Are we supposed to “wear God out” (in the Greek, “give him a black eye”) until God relents and does our bidding? Is it appropriate to ask for justice (better translated *vengeance*) against our opponents? Does God really answer our prayers just to get us to shut up?

One answer to these questions is that the parable works negatively. That is, it demonstrates God’s character by way of contrast: the whole point is that God is *not* like the unjust judge but is instead a just and loving God who does not delay when the “chosen ones” cry out, who “quickly grants justice” to God’s children.

The problem with this answer is that too often, our lived experience doesn’t bear it out. Too often, God does delay. Too often, our most fervent prayers—for healing, for justice, for peace, for joy—go unanswered. Too often, our experiences with prayer lead us to perceive God as an unjust judge, turned away from the urgency of our requests for reasons we can’t begin to fathom.

I wonder if this parable isn’t about God at all. I wonder if it’s about us, about the state of our hearts and the motivations behind our prayers. Maybe what’s at stake is not who God is and how God operates in the world but who we are, and how we might fortify our spiritual lives through prayer.

Luke frames the parable with a one-line interpretation: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” A few verses later, Jesus concludes the parable with this zinger of a question: “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” So perhaps what the parable is doing is offering an illustration of two things: how not to lose heart, and what faith—the kind of faith the Son of Man longs to find on earth—might look like.

What does it mean to “lose heart”? The words that come to my mind include weariness, resignation, numbness, and despair. When I lose heart, I lose my sense of focus and direction. My spiritual GPS goes haywire, the world turns a murky gray, and all roads lead to nowhere.

In sharp contrast, the widow in Jesus’ parable is the very picture of purposefulness and precision. She knows her need, she knows its urgency, and she knows exactly where to go and whom to ask in order to get her need met. If anything, the daily business of getting up, getting dressed, heading over to the judge’s house or workplace, banging on his door, and talking his ear off until he listens clarifies her own sense of who she is and what she’s about.

As with many of the widows in the Bible (the widow of Zarephath, who feeds the prophet Elijah; Anna, the prophetess who awaits the infant Messiah; the radically generous widow whose “mite” Jesus commends), there is nothing vague or washed out about this bold, plucky woman. She lives in Technicolor, here, now, today. “Give me justice! I will not shut up until you do.”

What happens when we pray? What is prayer for? I can only speak from experience, but I know that when I persist in prayer—*really* persist, with a full heart, over a long period of time—something happens to me. My sense of who I am, to whom I belong, what really matters in this life, and why—these things mature and solidify. My heart grows stronger. It becomes less fragile and flighty. Once in a while, it even soars. And

sometimes—here’s the surprise—these good things happen even when I don’t receive the answer I’m praying for.

Not that unanswered prayer doesn’t take a toll. It hurts and it baffles. It can break our hearts. But maybe that’s the point of the parable, too: the work of prayer is hard. The widow’s predicament is not straightforward; she has to make a costly choice every single day. Will I keep asking? Dare I risk humiliation one more time? Do I still believe that my request is worthy of articulation? Can I be patient? Am I still capable of trusting in the possibility of justice?

Because prayer is, finally, a great mystery. We can’t know—it’s not given to us to know—why some prayers are answered quickly and why many others are not. We can’t understand why our earnest pleas for justice (or healing, or peace) hit the wall of God’s silence and sometimes remain there for weeks, months, years, or lifetimes. And yet, from the heart of this bewildering mystery, Jesus asks, “Will I find faith on the earth?”

In this week’s readings, faith is about persistence. The widow persists in her belief that good things will come to her, even when the odds look wretched. Jacob, wrestling the angel in total darkness, persists until the blessing of a new name and a new future are granted to him. The writer of 2 Timothy encourages persistence again and again, “whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.”

And the psalmist reminds himself—and us—that the reason we can be persistent is that God is. God is our powerful and relentless keeper who neither slumbers nor sleeps, who watches over our comings and goings and guards our days and nights. Our persistence can never be in vain, because it is rooted in the Lord’s, the one who made heaven and earth.