

October 16, Ordinary 29C (Luke 18:1-8)

Luke says this story is about prayer. But the widow keeps asking for justice.

by [Diane Roth](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue

My husband and I were born and bred in the Upper Midwest. When our son moved to Atlanta, we got our first exposure to that part of the South. One of the first places we visited was the Martin Luther King Jr. Center. We toured the old Sweet Auburn neighborhood and the house where King grew up. We checked out the exhibits about the civil rights movement and heard stories about the lives of King and his family.

At the gift shop, I bought a book: *No Turning Back: My Summer with Daddy King*, by Episcopal priest Gurdon Brewster. I ended up reading the whole book on the plane home.

In 1961, Brewster was a seminary student in New York, and he spent the summer working with Martin Luther King Sr. and his son at Ebenezer Baptist. He worked with the youth group, and he tried to put together some special events for integrated youth groups. He had a couple of successes, a lot of setbacks, and some close calls.

He also learned to pray.

Before Ebenezer, Brewster had never said a prayer out loud unless it came directly from the Book of Common Prayer. He writes about his fear of speaking, his stilted language, and his progress in prayer as he gained experience throughout the summer. He tells one story of a young teenager who was in the hospital, dying of an unknown disease. As he prayed for and with her, he began to pray intimately, as if he were in conversation with God. This dying young girl taught him how to pray.

In the old days, Luke's strange parable of the widow and the unjust judge was called the parable of "the importunate widow." *Importunate* means persistent, but not in a good way. So this parable has two characters: an annoyingly persistent widow and a judge who doesn't care about justice.

What is it about? Luke tells us that the story is supposed to encourage us to “pray and not lose heart.” But what the widow asks for—over and over and over and over again—is justice.

Prayer and justice. I don’t know about you, but I rarely think of those two words in the same breath or even in the same sentence. I don’t think of my friends who are passionate about social justice as being passionate about prayer. (Social justice means doing something, and isn’t prayer the opposite of doing something?) Likewise, the people I know who are passionate about prayer for the most part look at me blankly when I talk about social justice.

But prayer and justice are two things that Brewster learned from his summer with Daddy King. And as I read the strange parable of the importunate widow, they seem more connected than I thought. This parable of the widow beating on the door of the unjust judge is about both.

Persistent prayer and seeking justice both involve struggle, wrestling, honest questioning. When we come to God in prayer, we learn to speak honestly, to ask questions, to persist despite failure and silence. We also struggle when we persist in seeking justice, and we become more honest with God and with ourselves.

And in both cases, we persist because somehow we have learned to trust God. We believe that God, unlike the judge in the parable, is just—that ultimately God is on the side of healing, of reconciliation, of the poor being lifted up and the silent finding a voice. Sometimes I don’t know why we keep believing it, but we do.

Some readers of this parable have come to the conclusion that God is the widow—beating on the doors, our doors, trying to convince us to do the right thing. God is the annoyingly persistent one. There is something intriguing about that, although I don’t think it solves any problems or ties up any loose ends.

In the end, we have prayer and justice—and the persistent trust that somehow, in the end, the doors will open and justice will prevail.