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A Homily on the Parable of the Persistent Widow

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A HOMILY ON THE PARABLE OF THE PERSISTENT WIDOW

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Luke 18:1—8

When I look at situations of adversity, I am always impressed with how others persevere. I particularly think of the marginalized whose situations stand in stark contrast to my own life. For example, hurricane victims who look to repair the damage done when their homes, even entire villages have been swept away by torrential rain. Insurance companies categorize the storms as “acts of God”. People are powerless to prevent the damage, so it is chalked up to the power of a higher order. While this is a dramatic instance of adversity, it is one which is happening with increasing regularity and increasing intensity.

Other marginalized populations include the situation of migrants. They take great risks traversing long distances and crossing borders into unfamiliar country. There is a possibility of rejection by coming to an unfamiliar place. They must create new relationships without necessarily knowing the language, without knowledge of what work opportunities are present in their new place, and they have removed themselves from familiar relationships in the hopes of improving their situation. Yet migrants manage to create a new start and overcome these obstacles in a new place. They begin to learn and have success in new language or languages, find gainful employment, and root themselves in their newfound place.

For myself, persevering can mean getting through my work and making it to the end of the week.

In the parable of today's Gospel, Jesus leaves the widow's adversary unnamed. We don't know who it is, or what precise details of her plight may be. In Jesus' time, widows were vulnerable to a great degree—widows lived on the margins. They were there along with orphans, those with leprosy or other diseases, as well as tax collectors. They were the 'untouchables.' These groups may be categorized similarly in our contemporary situation as well. We can see who the 'untouchables' today in our society as well: the homeless, migrants, or imprisoned to name a few.

Yet here this woman stands defiantly against a judge who we know is not of great character, demanding that he deliver justice, otherwise she will give him a black eye! The translation of the text suggests that this is the case.¹ The disciples may be wondering, who is this woman? Why is she so insistent on receiving a just decision? One question I have of this parable is who might the widow represent to my own life? Who around me in my contemporary situation is like the widow of the Gospel?

The judge, who is slow to respond, only gives a decision when threatened with the use of violence. The call of the Gospel here is to be like the widow, constantly demanding justice, and persevering in prayer. If this widow, who stands up for her liberation, casts aside the 'untouchable' quality of her identity and perseveres with a lowly judge, how much more quickly then will God respond to those who continue to pray?

This peels back another layer as I reflect on this Gospel—how might I pray? To create time and space for prayer in addition to completing work hours and study, and all the other things in my life, persevering to the end of the week is a challenge for myself. Here I look to the example of those who are marginalized and am awestruck by their capacity to create such a space for prayer. I imagine prayer can be

1 Daniel Donal Durken, *New Testament*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press (2009): 283.

manifested in small and in large ways. Whatever way that is, we are compelled by Jesus' message in this Scripture to do so.

Some of those reminders may come in our daily rhythm. Finding time to acknowledge the beauty of the earth or the beauty of people's actions is something which we may consider. The perseverance of the marginalized, like the widow of Luke's Gospel, is something that we should look to as a way of prayer. In the novel *Shantaram*, by Gregory David Roberts, he describes a scene in which one of the characters offers a poor, young girl money, but she refuses, laughing at the other character. He says, "There is no act of faith more beautiful than the generosity of the very poor."² Not only was this girl poor in the worldly sense, but also exhibits a poor spirit. Those who are struck with disaster such as a hurricane, or faced with a long journey, such as migrants are examples of the poor to whom we may look. The experience can be humbling, even humiliating. When others are in an hour of need we may be called to be witnesses to their poverty of spirit and worldly possession.

What we hear in this Gospel is that we are to persevere in prayer. If this woman, who deserves justice from a crummy judge can persevere, so can we. If our brothers and sisters who can weather a hurricane persevere, how do we offer support to them? How might we be witnesses of the Gospel in action? If friends and strangers take great risks by leaving their homeland, what is it that we do to help them assimilate? As we turn now in the liturgy to the Eucharist, let us pray that we may have the perseverance to serve as witnesses to the Gospel.



2 Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram*, London, Abacus (2003): 189.

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