

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

“Persistence or Resilience?”

Jesus taught in many parables, with the focus on God’s Kingdom coming to life on earth and growing in the hearts of faithful believers. He used examples that people would know and relate to. Jesus strongly encouraged His followers to “*always pray and not lose heart.*” I think that can be interpreted as “always pray and don’t give up!” This encouragement was an introduction to the thought of persistence. For example in today’s Holy Gospel Jesus uses the example of an unjust judge and a widow who just wouldn’t take no for an answer. She was persistent. I found a definition of persistent being “*continuing firmly or obstinately in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition.*” Some characteristics of persistence are tenacity, persevering, resolute, unrelenting, resilience, and even more. This woman that Jesus described must have been like a bulldog that never quits – and pursued what she wanted – justice.

I find it interesting that some people when preaching on this have called it the parable of the persistent widow, and others will say the parable of the unjust judge. It think it depends on your point of view – sort of like the glass half empty or the glass half full, while some are just happy to have a glass!

Jesus uses this parable to teach his disciples never to give up. He shows them the importance of persistence and resilience. He knows that life involves disappointment, loss, injustice, and persecution—all very good reasons to give up and lose hope! But a life attuned to God’s presence, justice, and goodness is a life that can endure.

According to Mosaic law, judges were to give special attention to widows, primarily because of their dependence upon men. When the husband died, a widow was left at the mercy of relatives and the eldest son to provide for her. It would be uncommon for a widow during this time to be able to go to a judge and be an advocate for herself. Men were the ones who would do that kind of work on behalf of their families. As a widow, she was one of the marginalized or the fringe in her society. Most widows were targets of oppression and fraud. However, her status did not stop her in her never-ending pursuit of justice.

The widow in this parable should serve as a model for discipleship with respect to persistent prayer. She goes before this unjust judge with her petition over and over, not taking no for an answer. She was resilient and she was faithful to what she believed in. She was persistent in her pursuit of justice. But, ultimately, this parable reminds us we must trust that God will bring about God’s justice on the earth.

That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t pursue justice diligently as God’s ambassadors of mercy and peace. But to the contrary, this parable is about those characteristics of resilience that develop when we decide never to give up, even in face of the overwhelming obstacles in front of us. Resilience is the strength of character to keep going even when we encounter challenges. It can be grown or developed, like a muscle. This widow must have some muscles!

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When we talk about being resilient and having the strength of character not to give up, being resilient can be done individually by encouraging yourself. You can find it within yourself to keep going, even when it seems that all odds are stacked up against you. This is why Jesus tells the story “*to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*” Prayer cultivates perseverance. Through prayer we can seek the Holy Spirit to intercede for us.

Resilience can also be experienced by those who are on your side and know your story can come to support you through prayer, words of encouragement, and by physically coming to your aid to help with your needs.

I want to suggest to you that the judge in this parable does not represent God. The judge is unjust and doesn't care about what this widow needs. Jesus tells this parable to His disciples to help them understand that if this judge, who is unjust, finally listens to the woman's request and grants her justice, how much more will a loving and just God answer the petitions of His own children who cry out for help.

This widow's persistence illustrates our need to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer changes us more than it changes the people around us. It deepens our faith and trust in God and empowers us to wait with hope for God to act. It's the reason why Jesus ends the parable to his disciples with the question of whether or not the Son of Man will find anyone faithful when he comes – as He asked, “*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” (Luke 18:8 ESV) I think we can clearly ask ourselves will He find people who are still praying, who have not given up, who have not lost heart? I think that looking at our society today we still have a ways to go!

This gospel reading challenges us not just to pray, but to trust in God. Even when the justice that we seek does not come immediately, will we have enough faith to endure until change happens? Will we continue to call upon God to see it through?

This widow had no advocate to speak on her behalf, which left her alone in a hopeless state. But rather than giving up, she was relentless in her pursuit of justice. The unrighteous judge finally gave in to her plea because he knew that she would not stop coming to him until she received justice. Resilience demonstrates itself both in being and doing. Resilience is more than something you do; it is who you are. It's about understanding that your strength comes from the power of the Holy Spirit, who is in you. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 “*do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*” The Holy Spirit is the inner strength from whom you can draw to stand up in the world. Once you learn to be resilient, you can sit in the midst of a storm and be still.

What will your answer be to Jesus' question? “*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” (Luke 18:8)