

# Persistent in Justice, Love

How the cries of the oppressed aren't ignored by GOD

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

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Proper 24C | Luke 18:1-18

She got a ticket for driving through a yellow light.

I'll never forget how mad she was when she arrived. Livid. Eyes ready to explode.

"It wasn't red. It wasn't stale yellow. The light just turned yellow. And you know what the officer said? 'I have the right to cite you for running through a yellow light.' Can you believe that?"

Part of me couldn't. I was aghast. The justice-seeking side anyway.

The other side, the cynical side of me which knows the world and how things really are. Well, that side was not surprised in the least.

"How much?" I asked.

"\$75. But I'm not gonna pay it."

The police in Alma, Michigan are notorious. They aren't the most notorious in the region. That "honor" went to the good police of St. John's who gleefully ticketed drivers on US-27. The kind of officers which never set a speed trap they didn't like.

I had my own run in with the Alma police a few years earlier. Joel and I were going to a conference in Germany. I was 16 and we were staying on campus with my sister. We turned from Wright Avenue onto Superior, just four blocks from her dorm.

An officer pulled us over and asked me how fast I thought I was going.

"I don't know, sir."

"I clocked you going 35. Do you know what the speed limit is here?"

"No, sir. It was 35 on the other street, but I haven't seen a sign."

He motions in front of me to look.

"Can you see the sign?"

Just coming into view at the end of the headlights was the first marking of the speed limit: 25.

He gave me my first speeding ticket for going 35 in a 25. I resisted the urge to ask how I was supposed to know it was 25 since that was the first sign, but I accepted the ticket. And then wondered if maybe Gwen could help me figure out out how to tell our parents.

So I knew the officers in Alma to be sticklers, particularly with college students. But I didn't know them to be ticket-for-a-yellow stickler.

## My friend fought the ticket.

At the time, I thought she was crazy.

Well, her Dad worked for Saturn and so they got an expert witness to show up in traffic court. I would have loved to see the face of the judge and the officer when she walked in with her father and this expert witness.

An expert witness of an engineer who brought diagrams. He calculated the stopping distance of her make and model. He proved that if she slammed on her break with all her might, given the timing of the yellow, she would have slid into the intersection.

It was impossible to safely stop at the yellow in question.

This is persistence. And at the time, I thought she was being utterly ridiculous. It cost her \$200 to pay for the expert to fight a \$75 ticket. That's a net loss.

But that isn't the point, is it? It took me a long, long time to understand that. To understand the true value of justice.

## Jesus's parable is about persistence.

### In the midst of injustice.

It begins by saying he was teaching them of "their need to pray always and not to lose heart." And then tells a story of a powerless woman, a widow, facing off against an unjust judge.

Now I've gotta be careful. We have a judge in our congregation, so I don't want him to think I'm calling him names, but for Jesus, the idea of an unjust judge is an oxymoron. To be a judge means you are going to be just. That's the whole point!

But the guy in this story isn't just. And he isn't swayed by the unjust plight of the woman coming to him.

He's moved by her persistence. He's annoyed!

Jesus could've used any old story. He could've used the one I used. My friend stood up to injustice. The daughter of an automotive engineer with enough resources to fight back.

And had she lost, she'd be out all of \$275. Which her Dad might have paid.

Jesus could've made use again of the persistent neighbor who wakes the man next door in Luke 11.

But he chose a widow and matched her up against a judge. A David vs. Goliath. A student against a tank. A tribe against an oil company.

## This is more than prayer.

It's prayer in action. It's persistence in the midst of injustice.

Jesus gives us this image of a terrible situation for a reason.

The judge is unjust. In Jesus's context, it is absolutely his job to fear GOD and respect

others. But more important is that she has come day after day begging for justice.

We're not talking about her side in a dispute. The story presupposes that she's getting railroaded or abused. That she has just cause for her grievance.

This isn't he said / she said. Justice is owed her. And the judge keeps ignoring her.

This guy is the worst!

And this woman can't afford to fight it. A political system stacked against her. To go against a judge who refuses to even acknowledge the injustice.

So Jesus turns it. He compares the absolute worst slime of the earth unjust judge to GOD. And he says if that skeezeball can be moved this way, then how much more awesome is GOD? Can you imagine GOD ignoring you when you cry out?

Well, some of us can. Because we've cried out.

## I want to go out with a big push on prayer.

But I can't, because that makes GOD sound like a genie: just rub the lamp hard enough and {poof!} our wishes are granted.

The last line tames that prayer as wish-fulfillment idea:

"And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Just as we think Jesus is telling us to just pray really hard every single day and GOD will answer them, he busts open that theory. When he comes, will he find any faith at all?

The parable isn't just about persistence in prayer as we think of it. It's about what that actually looks like. Not *Hey, GOD, it sure would be awesome to get that job.*

*or Dearest GOD, please keep my family safe.*

*or that prayer many of us learned as children: Now I lay me down to sleep...*

This isn't the kind of prayer Jesus is talking about. He's talking about prayers cried out for justice. For GOD's justice. In the widow and the orphan. The homeless and the lost. For

the hungry and the addicted. And the immigrant and the college student.

Cries for the exploited, oppressed, forgotten, or aggrieved. The people suffering. And those who suffer in seeing them that way.

Prayers of justice. And not our sense of justice with our human sense of fairness and politics; which pretends to balance the rich against the poor. But GOD's justice.

Jesus leaves us with an open ended question.

He doesn't say

*You horrible people! Where's your faith?*

And he doesn't say

*Look at you! So much faith all up in here!*

He says

"when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Will he find it? In our cries for justice? In our actions forged in faith? Will he find it here? In Terre Haute and Central Indiana?

Will he find it in our worship and stewardship? In our outreach? To the homeless? To Salvation Army's Christmas program?

Faith isn't just praying and wishing things were different. It's about love. The ridiculous, compassionate, generous love GOD gives us for no blessed reason other than that we so need it.

And this story Jesus tells about prayer and this persistent woman? This is Jesus's conclusion to telling his disciples about all the bad stuff on the horizon after the cross. Persecution, violence, division. An unjust judge in the midst of suffering.

The question is as open-ended as our lives. As our suffering. Our sense of injustice. Oppression. Brutality.

But we can be as persistent in seeking justice as GOD is in seeking love.

May we pray with our bodies, our presence, our love for all our neighbors. May our cries for justice ring throughout the world. And may our love and generosity be unshackled from our unjust judges and made free in the light of Christ. Amen.