

“The Echo That Roared”
Luke 18:1-8
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If you listen carefully to the Gospel of Luke, you can hear the echoes.

Rolling through the pages of Luke’s account of the life of our Savior, are echoes of the words of the prophet Isaiah, echoes of the Law of Moses, and echoes of the history of the people of Israel. Those ancient voices were strong and their staying power great as they lived on throughout the centuries to be heard once again by their spiritual descendants. And along with the echoes of those ancient voices, you can hear too echoes of Luke’s own voice, and tonight’s story is a chance to hear several of these echoes converging, as Jesus tells his disciples a parable which he hopes will strengthen them for the days and years ahead, this “parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart.”

The first persistent voice we hear is that of the cause of the widow, one of the most powerful voices emanating from the Old Testament law. Again and again, God’s people are commanded to care for the widows, orphans, and foreigners in their midst, to care for the most vulnerable, the most easily forgotten, forsaken and forlorn. There was perhaps no greater reason for the exile of God’s people in Babylon than the neglect of widows, orphans, and foreigners, for all the misdeeds of the kings, and their trampling of the poor, hurt no one more than these whom God entrusted to the whole community and to whom God showed special

provision and care. Get out your concordance one of these days and see just how often the care of this vulnerable triumvirate is charged to God's people. It is not chivalry at the root of this commandment, but justice, not a "women and children first" show of macho bravado, but a deeply rooted knowledge of the human tendency toward a social Darwinism at odds with the divine purpose. Charles Darwin didn't invent the idea of the survival of the fittest; he merely described it. The widow, orphan, and stranger were thus the most likely to be abused, defrauded, and taken advantage of, a reality which Jesus highlights as he shares this parable.

The widow in the parable may not have a name, but she has a case, even if we don't know exactly what it was. Most likely she was trying to reclaim some property her "opponent" was trying to cheat her out of. Her last recourse is this judge, seemingly a man unfamiliar with the echoes of the past now ringing daily in his ears. We may imagine our widow sitting outside his window offering her mantra from Psalm 146: "The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin," and he tuning her out, as we are told that he feared neither God nor man. But finally he grows tired of her white noise and takes up her case, rather like we might turn on the television to quiet our children's lament of "Mommy or Daddy, I'm bored." "I will grant her justice," he says, "so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." The echo that roared.

Jesus makes sure that the disciples do not miss the point by making sure they see the comparison that he is making, the old “how much more will God do for you” exercise designed to help them to understand the nature of the reign of God. If even this callous judge will finally grant a widow justice, how much more quickly will our compassionate God respond when one of us seeks the justice that God has ordained. “Of how much more value are you than the birds,” Jesus has already reminded them, and “how much more will God clothe you” than the beautiful lillies in the field who outshined even King Solomon in all his glory. Be persistent in your prayer and your hope, Jesus is saying, and God will indeed respond, even if the local magistrate will not. You can count on it.

For those seeking reassurance that God is listening, this would be a fitting end to the passage, but there is a curious addition, an extra line that doesn’t seem to fit: “And yet,” Jesus adds, “And yet, when the Son of man comes, will there be faith on earth?” This third question Jesus asks, the third after, “will not God grant justice?” and “will he delay long in helping them?”, the third is not so easy to answer because the third question is not about God, but about us. God’s promises are sure; our commitments are not. “Will you be persistent in prayer until the day comes when I return?” Jesus asks. “Will I find the same faith on earth then that I found when I first arrived?” And it is here that we hear another echo, this time from Luke’s own story.

The question Jesus is asking is this: “Will you be as faithful in your prayer as another widow I knew? Will you be as persistent in waiting for me as was the prophetess Anna,” way back in chapter 2, a widow about whom it was said that she “never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.” Anna, like the righteous and devout Simeon in the passage before her, persisted in her hope and her prayer and her faithfulness until the coming of Jesus the first time. You remember these two who waited for the Messiah and met him face to face when Mary and Joseph came to Jerusalem to present him in the temple eight days after he was born. These two faithful characters are, to Luke’s eyes, the kind of disciples that the twelve should aspire to be. “Will you, Simon Peter, be able to hope as fervently as Simeon?” “Will you, Mary Magdalene, wait for Jesus as long as Anna?” Will Jesus find the same faith on earth the second time that he found the first time? Times will be tough, Jesus is saying. “Will you have what it takes until I come again?”

Not surprisingly, this is not a question stalled in Jesus time, but one which should still be echoing through the chambers of our hearts today. How do we remain persistent in our prayer, in our righteousness, in our hope, in our being the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ? Jesus was well aware of the possibility of letting other things take precedence over caring for widows and orphans, and by extension, all of creation. He only had to look at the failures of the faithful in his own day. And so he saw the need to challenge his followers that they might not fall

into the same trap. By recalling the faithful Anna, he used the echoes of the persistence in his own life to issue that challenge. Perhaps we might do the same.

Jesus begins his parable by reminding the disciples to pray always and not lose heart, and of course they had a lot to worry about, much like the widow in the story. They were a largely impoverished, occupied, marginal group, with few prospects for the future. We, on the other hand, may not always have the same motivation to remain consistent in our prayer, or in keeping the echo alive.

Probably, we are more like a certain crew of fishermen who were caught in a sudden storm on Lake Superior. They bailed and they threw stuff overboard, but their efforts didn't seem to make any difference. It seemed that unless something drastic happened soon, their boat would be swamped. None of the men was experienced at prayer, but they selected one of them anyway because, well, they had nothing more to lose but their lives. The one selected to pray hadn't been to church in a number of years and confessed he hadn't done much praying during the recent years either. Nonetheless, he was urged to speak on their behalf to the Almighty. And so he prayed, "O Lord, I haven't asked you for anything for 15 years. And if you deliver us from this storm and bring us safely to land again, I promise that I won't bother you for another 15 years." Our praying may come and go according to the crises in our lives, but so much of the rest of the world is not so lucky. So many people face dire circumstances and unjust judges, but surely they are not the only ones called to be persistent in prayer, and in seeking justice.

But certainly, praying that others might receive justice cannot be all we do. We remain persistent by not only remembering them, but by adding our own voices to those of the widow's, even though it may not be our case. Tom Ghormley related a story during our retreat his weekend that illustrates the power of our combined voices. Seems many years ago he was a member of a church that participated on the letter writing campaigns coordinated by Amnesty International. These campaigns invited people of conscience to send personal letters to the people around the world who decided the fates or conditions of political prisoners, or prisoners of conscience as they are often called. And he and members of his church wrote hundreds of letters over many years to the warden of a prison in the former Soviet Union where a certain man, Yvgeny, was being held for trying to distribute Christian literature. Years and years went by, years in which they letters without ever receiving a response, or even an acknowledgement that their letters had been received. But they were faithful, and they were persistent, and they were hopeful. And lo and behold one day they received word that Yvgeny had been released from prison, and would actually be able to come and tell them his story. And when he did, he shared how he had been sustained through all those years of captivity, and how he knew whenever another batch of letters had arrived, for it was then that he received another blanket, or an increased ration of food, or one less beating from a hostile guard. Those letters had worked. They had softened the hearts of those who held his life in their hands. They worked because they took the

echo that Jesus told of in his parable, and they added some more noise to Eygeny's cry for justice until it was like the sound of a mighty river too loud to ignore any longer.

That is the echo we must keep the echo. We cannot let the word that gave that widow strength ring any less loudly in the ears of those for whom justice has been denied, just because we do not too have the misfortune of finding ourselves in her position, seeking justice from someone with neither belief nor fear of God. It may well be the echoes emanating from our own lives that reach the ears of the person needing to hear that ancient word. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" I guess that depends on how persistent we are willing to be, for like the echoes that ring through the Gospel of Luke that inspired the faithful in Christ's time, it will be the echoes of our persistence that will inspire others to persist in faith, in prayer, in peacemaking, in compassion, in being the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ. May God help us to have the persistence of widows. Amen.