

“Widows and other Superheroes”  
Luke 18:1-8  
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Preached October 28, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

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 bilk 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.

I try to keep up with the news of the previous places I have called home, and it is easier now than ever with the Internet. I can read each day what is happening in St. Cloud and Pittsburgh, and occasionally I come across something about people I knew in those places. This week, a rather remarkable story of persistence was published in the St. Cloud Times, a story that I think speaks to the call to persistence that Jesus extends. It concerns Superman, as a certain John Fillah likes to think of himself. Fillah has been dressing up, more or less, as the comicbook superhero Superman and standing on various street corners in St. Cloud for at least the last seven years, and probably longer. He simply stands there with his hands on his hips, with his cape billowing behind him, in the classic Superman pose and watches the traffic go by, reminding pedestrians to stand up for the values he admires. You see, John Fillah is convinced that the people of St. Cloud need a daily reminder to stand up for “truth, justice, and the American way,” the motto of Superman. Preaching that gospel in all seasons has earned Mr. Fillah not only a certain notoriety around town, but a growing suspicion about the state of his mental health. He is frequently asked by the police to find a new corner when the complaints about his imposing presence reach a critical mass.

This week, however, the police are not moving him along, but giving him an award. It seems that Superman, being more recognizable probably than the town’s

own mayor, was in the right place at the right time when a suicidal man was preparing to hurl himself off the Veteran's Bridge into the Mississippi River. It seems that the man about to kill himself recognized Fillah's face, and probably his own bouts of depression, and began to share with him the story of his pitiful life, revealing his intentions to kill himself, upon which revelation Superman leaped into action and physically restrained the man when he climbed over the railing of the bridge. And even though the man was fighting him off, Fillah held onto him until some passersby could help him pull him to safety. Superman is now receiving a commendation from the city, and although the award is for saving the man's life, it might as well be for his street corner persistence, a persistence that helped him make a connection with someone who really needed a connection. Police Chief Ballantine said the letter of appreciation would be hand-delivered to this Superman, and noted, in a nod to Fillah's persistence, "We can usually find him when we need to."

What kind of persistence do we practice? Are we the fair weather faithful who claim God when it is safe to do so or when we need something? Or are we there day in and day out banging the drum for Christ like John Adams does for the Cleveland Indians. For thirty-four years, John Adams has been in the centerfield bleachers pounding his bass drum when the Indians come up to bat. For thirty-four years John has been there waiting for a World Series-winning team. Let me tell you, there have been some lean years for baseball fans in Cleveland in the last

thirty-four years, and John Adams is the ultimate challenge to every fair weather fan.

Perhaps you may find these stories of mentally ill persons and baseball fans less than inspiring for your own personal persistence in faith. After all, it is not for Christ that they persist. But if saving a life and reminding an entire city to keep the faith, even about baseball, are not enough, consider some other acts of persistence you may have heard about. Consider the persistence of the Amish in their way of life, a persistence which carried them gracefully, if painfully, through the experience of the murder of their schoolchildren last year and taught the world a thing or two about grace. Consider the people who have persisted in pressing the case for the things in which they believe, like grieving mothers who pushed for things like the legislation that created what is now known as the Amber Alert system to activate communities to help find missing and abducted children. Consider the perseverance of people like the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina whose silent witness in the plazas across the country brought to light the dirty wars of the region. Consider the persistence of single parents who labor at two jobs so that their children might have a chance to go to college. Consider the persistence of caregivers of people with AIDS.

“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 and other superheroes. Amen.