

The Action of Persistence

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Hello, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself and provide some context before I begin. I am Natalia, the second of two daughters of my parents, an African American man from Texas and a white woman from California who met each other during basic training for the Air Force. We moved around the US about every 5 years until I went to college in Texas and became a social worker in Seattle, WA. It's with those lived experience that I engage with scripture. While in Seattle, I found the Lutheran church after leaving the Southern Baptist church. I craved the God of grace that I encountered at the table. It was working in a day center¹ for families experiencing homelessness that I received the call to ministry. Now, I am here, with you, in an internship, the final step before my ordination. One of the things that finalized my decision to go to divinity school was Wilda Gafney², an African American Hebrew Bible scholar who centers the lived experience and wisdom of Black women. Centering others, especially those on the margins of society, gives us a wider glimpse of the vastness and diversity in God's creation.

In today's gospel, we center a widow, perhaps one of society's most forgotten and vulnerable. With the death of her husband, she would have found herself at the mercy of her deceased husband's family. In this story, we see that someone has treated her unjustly. Going to court would have been a last resort, having tried to address her issues among those involved with no avail. Therefore, we can assume that she appears alone before the judge; no one in her family supported her quest, perhaps even her family working against her. This man is described as a man who "neither feared God nor had respect for people." What made her come before the judge, as she would have known that he had no respect for her, viewed her as less than human,

¹ I liken the day center to a living room for those who are without one

² *Womanist Midrash: A Reinroduction to the Women of the Torah*

would have easily treated her with contempt without a second thought? Did she believe her action would really bring about her justice? Sometimes we are called to an action, not because we certain things change will happen, but because it's the only thing we can do. The power that she had, as one of the most powerless people in her community was to show up and be persistent. It was to use the voice she had and to demand to be seen. Although the judge didn't respect her, she had respect enough for herself to believe that she deserved to be treated right. We don't know how long she went before the judge, how often and for how long she stood. I would think this puts her at risk. But, nevertheless, she persisted. And one day, the unjust judge granted her justice, because sometimes Evil men can help bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

The gospel reading ends with "will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night." And yet, we know that injustice still persists, though God's people cry out. As the people of Gaza rebuild, as the war in Ukraine continues, and in Sudan, the Congo, Myanmar, anywhere where people cry out for God's justice, why do their prayers return unanswered? I don't know, and any simple answer would be disingenuous, and sometimes in life, "I don't know" is the only answer we get. I wonder what wisdom we could gain if we think of the widow in this parable as the representation of God in the story. God, having taken the form of a fragile human is asking her creation to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God. Because we know that God does not align themselves with the mighty but stands in solidarity with the oppressed. Where her family could not show up, God was with her each day that she demanded justice, just as the psalm for today reminds us, that God is always with us. God,

maker of heaven and earth, is your keeper. Even if it doesn't feel like it, we are never alone in our struggles.

The parable starts with a spoiler, telling us that it's about prayer. For the longest time, I thought of prayer simply as making my requests known to God and then letting him do the heavy work. I also picked up the message that my own righteousness was most important in God answering them. So, when nothing happened, I felt like it was proof that I was not one of God's chosen ones. This is not the prayer modelled in this story by the widow. Theologian Miroslav Volf said, "There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you are unwilling to resolve." Sometimes it's because we want an easy way to fix our issues. Sometimes it can be because we are exhausted, maybe we think it's something that can't be changed by human hands. Prayer, in this story, is not just saying words to God, dusting our hands off, and waiting for God to do the heavy lifting. She is doing what she can to resolve her prayers and is persistent in her action. She made her petitions known to God and then went to work. She daily demanded justice from a man who saw no value in her.

We must have ears to hear the cries of others. Sometimes, people share their injustice with us, but because we don't experience it, we don't feel compelled to do something about it or we question the truth of their story. Let us not be like the judge who needs to be tirelessly bombarded with stories of injustice before we are moved to action. What injustice would God have you see clearly? God gave us each different gifts to bring about justice and peace. Not everyone is called to nail 95 Theses to a wall, but we all can do something. St Teresa of Avila said, "Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours." God is a God of justice, which can only come about when we show up. Jesus has entrusted the work of the

church to us. May our hearts be moved into action, so that these bodies that have been gifted to us bring about God's kin-dom. May our faith be strengthened by our willingness to take part in the work that God is already doing in the lives of God's beloved children.

Works Referenced

Spencer, F. S. (2012). *The Savvy Widow's Might: Fighting for Justice in an Unjust World* (Luke 18:1-8). In *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.