Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 19, 2025

Pray Always

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

The Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge

[Luke 18:1-8] *Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, `Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, `Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

Last Wednesday, I attended a Social Justice Salon at Town Hall featuring a panel of leaders from Solid Ground, the United Way, El Centro de la Raza, and the Downtown Emergency Service Center. They were discussing the impact of federal budget cuts and legislation on social services in Washington and where their organizations are seeing the greatest need.

Much of the night's conversation focused on poverty and hunger, which is significant and growing. Eighty percent of food banks rely on federal funding for about 60% of their budgets. Without it, many can't meet their communities' needs, especially in rural areas, where one food bank may serve an entire county.

They also talked at length about the WIC program, which provides vital nutrition to a third of Washington's babies, 30% of pregnant women, and more than a third of young children. When the government shut down on October 1, funding was expected to last only two weeks. An emergency extension keeps it running through October, but no plan exists beyond that.

At one point, Shalimar Gonzalez, CEO of Solid Ground, explained that beyond the federal cuts, fear is a big problem. Fear of ICE actions and racial profiling keeps people at home, isolated and disconnected from their community. Networks of belonging and compassion are being weakened, which exacerbates the distress of those in need.

When an audience member asked where the panelists find hope, one replied, "we are going back to the basics, to grass-roots community organizing, so vulnerable people stay connected and those who can help can't be ignorant about hunger. You know, justice work isn't about winning or solving problems once and for all. It's about staying in the struggle."

That struck me, because it's not easy to stay in the struggle. Yet that's where faith shows up – where the Spirit moves. Which is why this week's gospel feels so timely.

It's a story about persistence and protest and prayer – a widow who refuses to give up, even when confronting an unjust judge. Luke introduces it simply: Jesus told his disciples a parable about the need to pray always and not lose heart.

In first-century Palestine, being a widow was about as powerless as you could get. Without a husband, she has no name, no property, no legal standing. She is entirely dependent on others to protect her rights. In fact, the Greek word for "widow," *chera*, comes from a root meaning deficiency, as if she were lacking, incomplete.

Given that, the world expects the widow to stay quiet, to accept her

vulnerability and her fate. But she doesn't. Despite her so-called deficiency—or maybe because of it—she boldly and persistently demands vindication from the judge. She keeps showing up, day after day, crying out for justice.

At first, he refuses. But eventually he relents, not because his conscience is stirred, but because she has become impossible to ignore. The English translation says he gives in because she's "wearing him out." But the Greek is stronger: he says, "I will give her justice so that she doesn't strike me and give me a black eye!"

That's more than just annoyance. That's fear. It's as if the judge senses her power—something within her that cannot be silenced or shamed. And maybe he's right to be afraid. Because what he's up against is not just one woman's persistence. It's the divine persistence—the fierce and faithful energy of God that rises up wherever life is denied or dignity is threatened.

That's what Jesus is pointing to when he tells this story about "praying always." Because the widow's relentless protest is itself a form of prayer. She doesn't approach the judge with bowed head or folded hands. I imagine her as she is on the cover of the bulletin, looking him straight in the eye, fists clenched, voice strong, naming what has been taken from her and demanding that it be made right.

If that's prayer, then the Sunday School version of prayer most of us learned might be missing a few things. Because if her protest is prayer, then prayer is bigger—and braver—than we were ever taught. Prayer can be outrage. Prayer can be a cry for justice. Prayer can be insistence that the world as it is, is not the world as God intends it to be.

And when we understand prayer that way, it becomes inseparable from the complexity and messiness of life itself. Which means our daily work, care for one another, chores and shared meals, laughter and lament -- all are prayer. When everything we encounter or experience is received in the awareness of God's presence, we are praying always.

I think the widow knows that. She doesn't give up -- not because she expects an easy victory, but because she believes her life matters to God. She knows her suffering is not divine punishment or destiny—it's the result of a system that privileges the powerful. And because she knows herself as beloved—as "chosen," as Jesus says—she knows no deficiency in herself. She carries the strength of the One who made her.

There's a proverb that says, "Because she knew who she was, the world had no choice but to know it too." That's the widow. That's her power. She knows who she is. And because of that, the unjust judge—the stand-in for

every earthly power—has to reckon with her humanity.

I wonder if that's what finally moves the judge. Maybe he sees in her a strength that doesn't come from wealth or status, but from the unbreakable connection between a person and her Creator. The judge's authority is rooted in intimidation and control, but hers is rooted in love and faith. And there's no comparison.

In this parable, the widow is not only a model of persistence; she's a mirror of God's own faithfulness. She comes again and again. She won't be dismissed. She embodies the divine life that never gives up on us.

When I think back to that Social Justice Salon, I think that's what people were talking about—the kind of faith that stays in the struggle. Not naïve optimism, not blind endurance, but a deep, steady trust that love is stronger than fear. So this week, when we find ourselves weary or cynical—about the news, our neighbors, or our own lives—remember the widow. Remember that persistence itself is prayer.

Because if we believe that God is not only "out there" but "in here," then every act of courage, every small insistence on truth, every compassionate response becomes holy. God's life is moving through us, always. Maybe that's what Jesus means when he says, "Pray always and do not lose heart." He's not talking about reciting words or performing rituals; he's talking about living in awareness.

Awakening, again and again, to the divine life within and around us. Letting go of the habits of mind that keep us stuck in judgment or fear. Putting down the heavy burden of self-criticism and perfectionism. Opening our eyes to the steadfast grace shimmering all around us -- in the beauty of the world, in the tenderness of friendship, in the resilient hope that refuses to die.

When that awakening takes root, everything becomes prayer. And when everything is prayer, anything is possible.

So, pray always. We will not lose heart. Amen.