

Sermon – “She Persisted”

Scripture – Jeremiah 31:27-34, Luke 18:1-8

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In our first reading, Jeremiah 31:27-34, the prophet again speaks words of encouragement to the Israelites as they persist in their Babylonian exile. This is the only Old Testament text that refers to a “new covenant.” The new covenant is linked to the covenant at Mount Sinai where Moses presented the Ten Commandments; however, what is new about Jeremiah’s words is the law will no longer be an external code. The law will be written on each heart, (from the least to the greatest), it will be dynamic (reformed and always reforming) to new times and places, and it will expect a new accountability. As Christ will affirm centuries later, Jeremiah declares the children will not be punished for the sins of their parents. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. <sup>29</sup> In those days they shall no longer say:*

*“The parents have eaten sour grapes,*

*and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”*

*But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of the one who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. Amen.*

Our second reading, Luke 18:1-8, presents a parable unique to this gospel. The parable of the widow’s persistence is introduced as a parable about prayer and not losing heart, then moves into a story about justice, and ends with a question about faith. Hear now what the spirit is saying through Holy Scripture.

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. Jesus 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 accuser.’ 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 God’s chosen ones who cry out day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you; God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will God find faith on earth?” Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “She Persisted”

*The text: Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. Luke 18:1*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, may we, like the ancient Israelites and the widow in Jesus’ parable, persist with grace and dignity in prayer, faith, and justice. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In November of 2018, on the thirty-fifth anniversary of my ordination as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, I was well celebrated by this beloved congregation. During the reception in Parish Hall, Rev. McGill surprised me with the presentation of the book I shared with the children today She Persisted! In his note, he congratulated me on attaining 35 years of something I was told as a little girl by my faith community I could not do and commented that the world is better because of those who have not been willing to sit with “no” as a final answer. Rev. McGill concluded his message with God’s blessings to me and to all those whom I serve in ministry. I was quite touched by his thoughtful gift and generous affirmation.

According to the Oxford Dictionary: *To persist* is to stand steadfast and to persevere resolutely despite opposition, importunity, or warning. *To persist* is to remain unchanged or fixed in a specified character, condition, or position. *To persist* is to be insistent in the repetition or pressing of an utterance. *To persist* is to continue to exist especially past a usual, expected, or normal time.

Today’s scripture readings highlight those who have persisted and celebrate the difference their persistence has made in the world.

The ancient Israelites were able to persist during the Babylonian Exile because of the new covenant Jeremiah announces in today’s reading. A new relationship between YHWH God and the people is forged in captivity. The old covenant mediated through Moses at Mount Sinai and inscribed on stone tablets, was an external standard to which one must adhere. The new covenant is ‘within,’ ‘written” on one’s heart rather than on stone tablets. The new covenant is a relationship one lives into, not a standard one lives up to. The new covenant is internal. “I will be their God and they shall be my people.’

The radicalism of this new covenant is the good news that God is now equally present to all Israelites from the greatest to the least. As important as priest, prophet, and king were to Israel, God’s people could survive without the institutions of Jerusalem in Babylon.

As God writes the law upon their hearts, the captive Israelites begin to write the oral tradition of the Torah on papyrus paper, which will nourish people’s faith for centuries to come. Most biblical scholars believe the Books of the Torah were written and compiled during the Babylonian exile.

During this time, Jeremiah also debunks the notion of communal guilt, the belief that Israel’s suffering and captivity was punishment for the sins of their fathers. This is a reversal of so much negativity that has held the Israelites bound. Jeremiah makes it clear that children will not be

punished for the sins of their parents. No one's destiny is inevitable. Each person's choices and actions play a role in their salvation.

Five centuries later, Jesus' parable shines a light on Jeremiah's good news as we meet the persistent widow. The parable begins with the introduction of the judge who neither fears God nor respects people. The un-respected people are represented here by the widow whose unrelenting and steadfast pleas are so bothersome to the judge she receives the justice she seeks. The un-feared God will, by the end of the parable, eclipse the fearless judge.

The heart of this parable is the widow who refuses to give up her vision of justice. The odds may seem insurmountable as corruption, inhumanity, and impiety characterize the widow's world. Yet, the widow would seem to be the perfect example of someone with the law inscribed on her heart. Justice is completely internalized, and no amount of corruption can change the expectations and inner workings of this widow.

In this parable, Jesus reminds us that a seemingly powerless person is strengthened from within to persist in seeking justice, and then, by contrasting the God of mercy and loving kindness with the unjust judge, Jesus highlights the integrity and generosity of the One to whom we pray.

While the parable is framed by references to prayer and faith, the emphasis is on justice and how it figures in the confrontation between the vulnerable justice-seeker and the unjust power-holder. The parable culminates with the all-powerful, just, and merciful God granting justice to the vulnerable, chosen ones who cry out day and night.

There is only one other use of this term *chosen one* in Luke's gospel. Jesus on the cross is mocked by the religious leaders as "God's chosen one." They, like the unjust judge in the parable, inadvertently get it right despite themselves.

Crying out with a loud voice, Jesus addresses the Father and commends his spirit to God just before he breathes his last. God's chosen one, the one chosen on behalf of all others, fully God and fully human, absorbs the hostility of an unjust world in an act of mercy and grace, joins the chorus of the vulnerable in a cry for justice, and with a last full measure of devotion persists in integrity.

May we write God's word upon our hearts, may we persist with dignity in prayer, faith, and justice, and may we embrace the empty cross where we find the fullness of life and the mercy of God who hears our cries. O Be Joyful! Amen.