**Courageous Faith: The Persistent Widow**

**Luke 18: 1-8**

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October 18, 2020

Watching the Supreme Court confirmation hearings this week, I was reminded of how back in 2017, a debate over the confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions as Attorney General led to a new rallying cry for feminists across the country.  Senator Elizabeth Warren was arguing against confirmation of Sessions and began to read a letter from Coretta Scott King written in 1986 in objection to Sessions’ nomination as a federal court judge.  The letter criticized Sessions for impeding the black vote.  While reading the letter, Warren was interrupted first by presiding chair, Steve Daines, and then by Senator Mitch McConnell, claiming she was was breaking a senate rule that prohibits senators from ascribing "to another senator any conduct or motive unworthy or unbecoming a senator".  The senate then voted to silence Warren, and she was not allowed to speak again during the hearings.  After that vote, Senator McConnell said, “Senator Warren was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. **Nevertheless, she persisted.”**

Suddenly, the words “nevertheless, she persisted” began to appear all over the internet, on t-shirts and coffee mugs. The phrase was picked up by women across the country who have long struggled to have their voices heard.  Valerie Schultz wrote in [*America: the Jesuit Review of Faith & Culture*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/America_(magazine)), "It is a phrase we women embrace because persistence is what we do.  We women persist. Isn't that our job? Throughout history, we have persisted in our quest for respect, for justice, for equal rights, for suffrage, for education, for enfranchisement, for recognition, for making our voices heard. In the face of violence, of opposition, of ridicule, of belittlement, even of jail time, nevertheless, we have persisted.”  And so it was with the widow in the parable we just heard in our scripture reading.

We are nearing the end of our sermon series entitled “Courageous Faith” in which we are learning about characters in the Bible who are called to draw on their courage in order to do what God has called them to do.  We’ve looked at such varied figures as Abraham and the courage to leave the familiar and embrace something new, Shiphrah and Puah and the courage to do what’s right, Barnabas and the courage to break down barriers, and Amos and the courage to speak truth to power.  This week, we’ll take a look at the courage to persist through the eyes of a woman known only as “the persistent widow”.

 In Jewish culture, widows were among the most vulnerable members of society. As such, it would have been quite unusual for a widow to go to the high court and plead her own case to the judge. Since the woman in this parable does just that, she probably doesn’t have a son or brother to go for her. That, in turns, means that she also doesn’t have a male family member to care for her since her husband’s death – which puts her at risk of living on the streets, destitute and starving.

       We don’t know exactly what her case is about. Quite possibly she is seeking to get her dowry back from her husband’s family so that she will have something to live on. But this judge who “neither feared God nor had respect for people” really doesn’t seem to care. She is nothing but an irritant to him and in a system in which he has power and she has none, he chooses to ignore her cries for help and turn away.

But, she is not just any widow. She will not accept that. William Herzog, a scholar of the social and historical context of Jesus’ life, writes “all that is required of her for the system of injustice to work is her silence, yet that is precisely what she fails to offer.” The system expects her to be intimidated by his power, to accept her fate, to keep her mouth shut. Instead, she goes back to the judge over and over and over again. She keeps asking, keeps pushing, keeps crying out until finally, probably more from embarrassment or irritation than compassion, he backs down. He grants her the justice she seeks – the basic rights and protection that God commands for widows and orphans in Jewish law.

This kind of persistence takes tremendous courage.  A kind of courage we’re all in need of right now.  In the midst of a global pandemic which has killed more than a million people worldwide, 215,000 in the U.S. alone, just getting up and going about the daily work of life takes courage some days.  In the middle of a year which has highlighted so many different kinds of injustice in our country, despair sometimes seems to lurk behind every corner.  And those are just some of our communal challenges.  Each of us has personal stories, as well.  The challenge of going on after losing a friend or partner.  The struggle to keep trying when you can’t seem to communicate with someone who holds extremely different views than your own.  The hopelessness we may feel as we face life with depression, addiction, or an incurable illness.

  Yet, in this parable, Jesus encourages us to persist. To find the courage to acknowledge the struggle and then keep going. So, how?  When it feels as though a vaccine for Covid is light years away.  When a just and compassionate society for all God’s people seems like a pipedream.  When health and wholeness feel unreachable.  Where do we find the courage to persist?

  In recent years, researchers have found that the quality which enables us to persist is, in fact, resilience. And, thankfully, resilience is something we can foster in ourselves. According to a recent New York Times article, Dr. Steven Southwick, professor emeritus of psychiatry, PTSD, and Resilience at Yale University School of Medicine has interviewed a large number of very resilient people - people who have experienced adversity or trauma and come through it successfully - and discovered that they have several characteristics in common.

  First, they have “a positive, realistic outlook”.  Without denying the negative, they seek out what positives can come from a negative situation. They accept what they cannot change and focus their energy on what they can. So, in the case of the persistent widow, she recognizes that she is in a dire situation - she lives in a society in which she has very little power - but she also knows what she can do to try to create a better outcome for herself.

      In addition, resilient people have a strong sense of what is right and what is wrong, and they use that moral compass in decision-making.  The persistent widow knows that, under Jewish law, God calls on the community to care for widows.  She has reason to expect that her call for justice should be heard and to be angered by the judge’s indifference.  Her sense of what is right motivates her to keep trying.

      A third characteristic is that resilient people believe in something greater than themselves.  They have a spiritual or religious life that feeds their courage and strength.  When we understand the social context of the persistent widow, we realize that it is her faith in God’s promise of justice for those on the margins of society that keeps her going.

    Some of the characteristics of resilient people Dr. Southwick discovered are not as evident in the persistent widow but are still qualities we can foster in ourselves.  For example, resilient people give of themselves and find meaning and purpose in life through helping others.  In fact, they are, in general, people who have a sense of meaningful mission in their lives.  Finally, they have some sort of social support system - church, family, or friends that help them stay grounded and positive.

It’s interesting to note that these are all qualities of Jesus himself.  He certainly was a person who lived with purpose and mission, he was committed to helping and healing those in need, he had a deep faith that gave him strength and a strong moral compass that guided his teaching and his life.  He created a community, a social support system, for himself as he called the disciples to follow him.  And, finally, he certainly had a positive and realistic outlook.  He knew that what he was teaching and the decisions he made would anger the Jewish and Roman authorities, but he truly believed that what he was doing would create positive change.  Despite the rejection of the people in his hometown, the testing and threats from those in power, and, of course, ultimately, his sentence of crucifixion, he kept going.

So, where do you find yourself in this picture?  What are the challenges that make it difficult for you to keep going, to keep trying?  Which of the characteristics of resilient people do you see in yourself?  Which might you want to work on developing as we all live through this difficult time?  What do you need more of in order to persist?

In the end, the courage to persist, like so many other kinds of courage we have talked about in this series, comes from God’s gift to us of hope.  We are people of hope. Our church is a community of hope.  And the central event of our faith - the resurrection - is God’s ultimate promise of hope.  The resurrection is God’s promise that nothing that challenges us overpowers or deflates us.  Nothing that depresses, worries, or frightens us.  Nothing that intimidates or tempts us.  Nothing will stop God’s work for goodness and wholeness and love in this world. There may be a global pandemic.  Injustice may surround or oppress us.  So much of life may feel out of our control. Nevertheless, God persists.  May we as well. Amen.