

## PENTECOST XXI

*Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.* Luke 18:1

Prayer and justice, trust and deliverance, faith and judgment, resistance and persistence, the first and second comings of Christ – the Son of Man– and the life of believers. A thick theological stew cooked up in one short, vivid parable. And this morning, as well, the joyous occasion of the baptism of Benjamin Douglas Southwick.

We've all known someone like the widow. A hard luck case. Nothing goes right for her. Her husband dies and leaves her destitute, her daughters marry and go to live near their husbands' families and neglect to call or visit her. Her neighbor cuts down a big shade tree on her property, and she has to pursue him in small claims court, and she keeps losing and losing. She is a loser. She is a perpetual victim.

Except, wait a minute! Not so much... She keeps losing, but she keeps going back. She is a nag, a pest, a scold. She is relentless, she is irritating beyond measure, she is *not* lovable.

She's Chinese water torture, dripping on the hardest, the densest, of rocks, a callous and corrupt judge – a rotten politician who could care less. She follows him home from court, she stalks him, she pounds on his door and harasses him until he finally surrenders. He gives her what she wants, not out of the kindness of his heart, not out of a love of justice or any sudden ethical revelation. He capitulates with her demands out of pure self-interest. He wants to be left in peace. He doesn't even try to pretty up his motive. *I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone*, Jesus has him say, as if we might not *get* that this guy is a creep.

He wasn't interested in justice, but by stubborn, pig-headed perseverance the widow *got* justice. What can we learn from this not-so-exalted tale of two memorable but not-so-attractive characters?

I think back to our campaign for marriage equality. We activists, like the widow, kept going back to the same legislators, the same holdouts, over and over again. And politicians are such a mixed bag of folk, with such complex and murky motives. Some of our most inspirational leaders in the marriage struggle, like Diane Wilkerson and Sal Dimasi, turn out to be seriously flawed, probably corrupt, individuals.

And I honestly don't know how much the most inspirational of political leaders and speakers did actually to change the minds and hearts of the undecided and the recalcitrant. Some folks did indeed have genuine, conscientious, conversion experiences, and that was very moving to witness. But the conversions that turned the tide? Honestly, it was when we could demonstrate to the legislators that supporting marriage equality was a winner in the voting booths – that marriage equality supporters were not being booted out of office but, *au contraire*, winning their re-elections, that victory came within grasp. Good old self-interest kicked in, just as with the Unjust Judge.

But it was a process. A process of going back and going back. Persistence, persistence, persistence.

We are about to begin our annual pledge drive here at St. John's, the campaign we depend on to raise the bulk of our operating expenses for the next year. And before too long we will also be getting underway with a capital campaign, in which we will be raising funds to undertake very urgent repairs to our historic buildings.

So you will be hearing a lot of talk about needs, and about money, in the foreseeable future here. I'll be preaching, we'll be having meetings, folks will be calling on you, we'll be holding fundraising events. And on and on.

Some people don't like to talk about money in church, don't think it's appropriate, don't think it's spiritual. Some people don't like to talk about money at all.

But that's not Jesus. Jesus talks about money all the time. He talks about money more than any other single topic, more than he talks about love, or healing, or justice, or faith. He talks about money. His examples, his parables, feature money. We have to believe that the persistent widow today is looking for some form of financial recompense. And she gets it, through her persistence, her inappropriate, unseemly, aggravating, unspiritual, *persistence*.

So, my dear friends, many of us are going to be acting like the persistent widow in the months and weeks and yes, the years to come. We have to. If we don't the buildings that we all love, which house this community that we all also love, will not be housing us for too much longer. They are too desperately in need of repair for us to be polite or timid in our efforts.

One thing I'll say about politicians, they expect to be lobbied. Listening to interest groups is part of their job, because interest groups make up their constituency. And while

they may not agree with lobbyists' positions in many instances, they understand that the lobbyists are doing their jobs, just as the politicians are doing their jobs by listening.

In this community, my friends, we all are, or should be, one interest group. We share common goals, concerns, values, and hopes. Not in every instance, of course. But living and loving together in community means, I hope, that we agree more than we disagree, that more unites us than divides us. As we go forward with our fundraising efforts in times to come, I pray that we will all keep that central truth in our minds and hearts.

Persistence, that salient quality of the widow in today's Gospel, persistence may not sound like a high theological value. But persistence, her persistence, is effective. And there's nothing holy about ineffectuality, believe me. Nothing theologically exalted about faintness of heart, about giving up, about quitting.

And Jesus makes that point in the framing of his parable. *Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.* That's his launching pad for the parable of the persistent widow, that's the heart of his teaching about their mission and ministry. *Pray without ceasing. Don't give up.*

Persistence may not sound like a high theological virtue, but faithfulness surely is. And the two attributes have much in common. That must be why Jesus uses the parable about persistence to teach the disciples about prayer, about faithfulness in relationship. They say every preacher has one idea, and I guess mine is, or has become, faithfulness. Our faithfulness, and God's.

We said, and say, that the struggle for marriage equality was a struggle for justice, and it was. But justice was the end; persistence, faithfulness, was the means. Justice doesn't just happen, in the courts of ancient Palestine or in the Massachusetts Legislature. Justice is won through persistence, through faithfulness: our faithfulness, and God's.

So, my dear friends, as you hear and engage in conversations about our needs here at St John's, and you will, I promise – as these conversations occur, please understand them as exercises in faithfulness. As persistent endeavors to be faithful to our life here in community and to our mission and ministry to the wider world.

Into this community we prepare now to welcome Benjamin Southwick. His parents and godparents will make certain vows on his behalf. As will we, as we join in the prayers for Benjamin and as we renew our own baptismal covenant. We promise to be with him and support him in his spiritual growth, to provide him with living examples of

life in community, life in Christ. We promise to be faithful to him, and to be living examples of God's love and faithfulness.

And thus he will be blessed, as are we all. Alleluia! Amen.