

Proper 24C – Pentecost
The Rev. Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Trinity Episcopal Church
October 16, 2016

Acting on Prayer
Luke 18: 1 – 8

The other night after work, I arrived home to a darkened house. Cherise was away on a retreat and I had the place all to myself – that is, aside from Brendan and our three Celtic cats. So I decided to practice what our seminarian Erin calls “positive procrastination,” and settled down with the film, *Amazing Grace*, the story of William Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade in England.

Wilberforce was a young member of Parliament with no interest in religion or justice – getting ahead was what mattered. But one Easter, in his late 20’s, he had a powerful religious experience, and began to see Parliament not so much as a career, but as a calling from God. His eyes were opened to the injustice all around him, and he passionately embraced the cause of abolition.

This was an unthinkable goal to his contemporaries. After all, nearly the entire English economy depended to some extent on slavery. But guided by his faith, he worked for the next 20 years – overcoming the obstruction of his fellow members, the interruption of England going to war, and frequent illnesses that left him bedridden. Wilberforce’s faithful persistence echoes today’s gospel parable of the powerless widow and the unjust judge.

Luke’s community knew all about powerlessness – subjugated by the Romans, measuring their every word and action so as not to offend a passing soldier; seeing the prophetic power of their religion watered down by their priests, as they collaborated with their oppressors.

And the widow in today’s story *surely* knew about powerlessness. As the property of her husband, when *he* died, she had to ask her family to take her back in. Otherwise, she was consigned to a life of begging.

And the judge? He was probably not a “god-fearing” Jewish judge, who would have followed the Torah’s commands to protect widows and orphans, rather than taking advantage of them or ignoring their needs. Instead, he was probably a magistrate appointed by the Romans or by Herod.

The widow is engaged in some unexplained dispute with a neighbor. Given her hand to mouth existence, I imagine this as a real crisis in her life. As a good Jew, she probably prays continuously that God will come to her aid, that God will somehow open the hearts of her neighbor and this heartless judge. But like Wilberforce, she isn’t content to simply pray and leave the rest up to God. She prays, and then... she *acts*. The only real weapon she has is *persistence*, the willingness to keep coming back, over and over, for as long as it takes.

One day, the judge gives up the fight. As one translator renders this text, "... *the judge thinks to himself, 'I will grant her justice so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.'*" Confronted by a persistent God, who's been tilling the soil of this judge's heart ever since the widow's first approach, and by a widow grown strong on God's persistent infusion of courage and hope, in the end, the judge doesn't have a chance.

And what does all this have to do with us? Well, England just celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Here at home, we celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Slavery, as we all know, is a thing of the past, right? As our epistle reminds us, "... *those with itching ears seeking after newer teachers...*" are ready to move on.

Unfortunately, as historian Lisa Sharon Harper, recently put it, "... *one of the greatest myths of American history is that the Civil War ended slavery.*" She explains that a compromise inserted in the 13th Amendment an exception to freedom for slaves. It went, "except as a punishment for crime." Thus, the Jim Crow laws or "*peonage codes*" that followed were designed to lower the bar for what constituted criminality, leading to mass arrests and either "*free servitude*" or incarceration of former slaves for offenses as trivial as "sitting on a public bench too long." Why these arrests? So that the loss of hundreds of thousands of free laborers in the cotton fields could be replaced by hundreds of thousands of prisoners doing free labor in those same fields, or laboring behind bars. Today, there are more African Americans in jails and prisons than there were slaves in 1865, and prison labor is a multi – billion – dollar industry spanning 37 states.

In the same way, even though former slaves were given the right to vote, the tactics of those who would disenfranchise them once again have become incredibly sophisticated in recent years. They've had to, because the demographics of our country are catching up with the historic sin of systemic racism. This year, the post – millennial generation, a progressive and inclusive group of adults between 18 and 35, are nearly 50% people of color. White Christians have declined to 45% of the population, and by 2039, whiteness itself will have become a minority status in America.

To slow this threat to white hegemony, Harper describes all kinds of strategies used to keep people of color away from the ballot box – widespread racially – based gerrymandering of legislative districts; fierce opposition to immigration reform and a path to citizenship; mass incarceration for non – violent crimes; voter restriction laws; and the resurgence of the white nationalist movement itself.

What is a disciple committed to baptismal living to make of all of this? Well, as our latest recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature would say, "*The answer, my friends, is blowing in the wind...*" It's blowing in the wind in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who says, "*To be neutral in a situation of injustice is to have chosen sides already. It is to support the status quo.*"

It's blowing in the wind in the words of Holocaust survivor and prophet Elie Wiesel who reminds us that, "*The opposite of love is not hate... it is indifference.*" And even though the struggle is long and uncertain, and that like Jacob, we are often left with a limp for our efforts, like it or not, in the face of injustice, we Christians are called to that same kind of continuous prayer *and* persistent action that William Wilberforce and the widow in today's gospel model for us.

Thankfully, we have hopeful guides along the way – like Martin Luther King, who famously reminded us that, "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it always bends toward justice.*" Which means to say, that in struggling for justice, success is understood through the lens of God's economy, and through the passage of *kairos* – God's time, not our own. It is found in our willingness to persist in prayer and action, day in and day out... and to continue doing the next right thing, over and over, without knowing what outcome might result.

So let us pray in the words of the prophet Marian Wright Edelman, who offers us this food for our journey:

*"Lord, help me to persist, although I want to give up.
Help me to keep trying though I can't see what good it does.
Help me to keep praying though I'm not sure you hear me.
Help me to keep living in ways that seek to please you.
Help me to know when to lead and when to follow.
Help me to know when to speak and when to stay silent.
Help me to know when to act and when to wait.
I am sorely lacking in good sense and a good spirit today.
And only You can give me both."*