

# Pushing the Right Buttons

**TEXT:**  
**Jeremiah 31:27-34**  
**Luke 19:1-8**

October 21, 2007

**W**e have all heard about the widow's mite. Last week for our moment on stewardship Jon and Barbara Heeb reminded us of her great gift. It is the story in the gospels about the widow who put her two coins into the treasury in the Temple. Jesus said of her, "Out of her poverty, she has put everything in [to the offering]". [Luke 21:1-4, Mark 12:41-44]

This morning, we are reading the story of the widow's mite. In this story, a widow was able to change an unjust ruling by her persistence. At the very beginning the writer tells us how we should interpret the story. He said this parable is about the need for prayer and not losing heart. [Luke 18:1] Apparently, there were some rabbis at the time of Jesus who taught that praying too often would annoy God. They suggested that only three hours a day should be set aside for prayers.<sup>i</sup> Jesus saw the importance of prayer differently. He encouraged his followers to be persistent in their prayers, and he told this parable to his disciples to encourage them to do so.

But there is another dynamic at work in this story as well. By introducing the characters of the judge and the widow, we know that this is a story about power. Someone who is without power or position, in this case, a widow, takes on someone in a

position of power, and wears him down with her persistence.

There were two characters in this drama. At the time of Jesus, judges were people of extraordinary power. They would hear the concerns and complaints of the people, and their word would be the final say in all legal matters. The Jewish law commanded that all judges be fair. In Deuteronomy, there is a charge given to judges that said, "You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and great alike." [Deuteronomy 1:17] Judges were to enact the righteousness of God through their rulings.<sup>ii</sup>

In reality, however, judges did not have prestigious law degrees from Ivy League Universities. Most had notorious reputations and were often called "robber judges."<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, they were not paid for their work. They took a part of the settlement as their payment and bribes were always welcomed. If someone came to a judge without first sending a bribe that would indicate that this client was poor, and most judges refused take the cases brought by widows and the poor. A judge would make excuses and false promises, "Come some other time, I will see that justice is done for you." Thus, the poor had to be persistent in order for their cases to be heard.<sup>iv</sup>

And then there was the widow. In the scripture, a widow was often a symbol of exploitation and oppression as well as the

object of compassion and justice. Biblical scholar Sharon Ringe noted, "A common theme in Hebrew scripture is the need for people – particularly those in authority – to fulfill God's purpose by caring for widows and orphans."<sup>v</sup>

The word for "widow" in Hebrew literally meant "silent one." In a patriarchal world, only males had the power to play a public role. Women did not and could not speak for themselves. For a widow, this was even worse. A widow was not allowed to inherit her husband's estate. She would have to rely on her son for her food and clothing. And if she didn't have a son, she would be destitute.<sup>vi</sup>

So while this parable may be about prayer, the illustration used is about power. The widow was perhaps the least powerful person in her community. She had no rights and no advocates. According to the social norms of the day, she should have accepted her fate at the hands of the judge, but she refused to do so. She acted out of character and the judge was astonished. The widow bothered the judge enough that he relented, and said that he would grant her justice before she wore him out. The phrase literally means, "Before she ends up giving me a black eye."<sup>vii</sup>

Let me now take a moment and place this story in our own times. Walter Brueggemann is one of the premier prophets of our age.

Until he recently retired he taught Old Testament at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta. One of his most challenging sermons began with these words.

*Something is going on among us and it cannot be stopped. It cannot be stopped by reactionary politics or more arms. It cannot be stopped by orthodox theologies or by stringent moralities. It cannot be stopped by shrewd therapeutic strategies or wise exegesis. It cannot be stopped but must be faced.*

*What is happening is that the world is being dismantled before our eyes. The world we have known is dying, withering, slipping through our fingers .... It is [slipping] economically as old powers tremble and the markets fall. It is [slipping] politically as the great nations cannot stop the new danger which we so piously label 'terrorism.' It is [slipping] intellectually as all kinds of new people do not accept our ways of knowing or the old conclusions we have drawn for so long. That the world is dying before our eyes is not idle speculation, but a daily experience of change so massive, of alienation so powerful, of anxiety so unending.<sup>viii</sup>*

What Brueggemann is pointing to is the sense of powerlessness we feel toward the acute troubles of our world today; troubles that place our lives in parallel with the persistent widow of the parable. Brueggemann would suggest that this story is an encouragement, an imperative even, for us to continue to bring the scope of God's justice to the issues of our day; that we, like the widow, continue to persist in prayer, in appeal and in our

advocacy, toward the powers that be in our world. We are to be encouraged, and not lose heart – remember, what Luke said this parable was all about – we are not to lose heart, because in her persistence, the widow appealed and bothered the judge to the point that he ruled in her favor.

This story was written to the second and third generation of Christians. Luke wrote the words of this gospel some 40 years or more after the life of Jesus. It spoke to the needs of the early church, which faced the difficulties of being exiled from the Jewish synagogues and being persecuted by the Roman Empire. Those were very challenging times. And yet this small band of believers was able to engage the powers until the Empire became part of their movement. With persistence, the early followers of Jesus were told, even the most corrupt and disrespectful judge could be persuaded to change his ruling.

Christians have practiced this same sense of persistence throughout the ages. For example, in the abolition movement in England and America in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christian people raised questions of justice in the face of great economic and political power. Eventually the power shifted. Again, in the American south, it was the persistence of Christians who began to turn the tide of civil rights, eventually the inequality crumbled and a more just and fair society began to emerge. In the 1980's, it was the activities of Christians in Hungary and Romania who began to turn those nations away from totalitarianism, and in South Africa, away from apartheid.

This is part of our call as people of God, to bother those in power who fail to act in a just manner, who neglect the poor and those who are oppressed. As one writer put it, bothering is what God's people do. Bothering is being persistent and relentless in the pursuit of justice. While this at times can seem to be a hopeless pursuit, we nonetheless continue to bother systems that are not inclusive; we bother authorities who lack compassion; and we bother politicians who think only of their needs and futures.

Let me conclude this morning with a story with a more light-hearted feel to it. Edward Bennett Williams, was one of the most powerful lawyers in Washington in the 1980's. He was the lawyer for, among others, Frank Sinatra, Robert Vesco, Hugh Hefner, Jimmy Hoffa, and Richard Nixon. He was so well connected that for a time he owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles.

One day Mother Teresa came to Washington to raise money for an AIDS hospice. She made an appointment to visit Williams. Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, "You know, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." They agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no.

Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're

touched by your appeal, but no.” Mother Teresa said simply, “Let us pray.” Williams looked at his partner; they bowed their heads and in the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa said, “Let us pray.” Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, “All right, all right, get me my checkbook!”<sup>ix</sup>

Pray Always. Do not lose heart. And be persistent in bringing the kingdom of God into your context.

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<sup>i</sup> Raymond Bailey, “Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost.” *The Lectionary Commentary; Third Reading: The Gospels*, edited by Roger E. Van Harn, (Eerdmans, 2001), 429

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Barclay

<sup>iv</sup> George Lamsa, *Gospel Light: Comments from the Aramaic and Unchanged Eastern Customs on the Teachings of Jesus*. (A.J. Holman, 1939), 286

<sup>v</sup> Sharon Ringe, *Women’s Bible Commentary*

<sup>vi</sup> Safiyah Fosua, United Methodist Church General Board of Discipleship.

[www.gbod.org/worship](http://www.gbod.org/worship)

<sup>vii</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Westminster, 1975), 222

<sup>viii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living*. (Fortress Press, 1991.)

<sup>ix</sup> Evan Thomas, *The Man To See*, (Simon and Shuster, 1991) From a sermon by Tom Long, "Praying Without Losing Heart" at: 30 Good Minutes.org