

I admit up front that I've never been one to set aside time to watch sports on television. But last Saturday I knew something special was going on. I happened to check out my social media feeds, and it seemed as though everyone I knew was talking about the USC - Georgia game. Apparently it was a nail-biter, and after USC pulled off a major upset, everyone in this state was euphoric. Perhaps less euphoric in the upstate, but still: everyone likes a surprise victory. People like it when the proverbial underdog pulls off a win.

If you are one to enjoy surprise victories, then today's gospel lesson is for you. It's a parable that tells us at the outset that it is about praying always and not losing heart. More specifically, though, this parable takes place immediately after Jesus gives a lengthy talk about the end of time. So this parable is about how we are supposed to wait. How we are to wait for that age when God will correct the evils of this world and make things just. As we wait for that, what does it mean to pray always and not lose heart?

In one corner of the parable we have a judge who is introduced as having no respect for the people and no fear of God. In the other corner is a widow who demands justice. Based on the context, we already know a lot. Judges in Jesus' day were supposed to fear God, because the role of Israelite judges was to be arbitrators of God's will. Since the judge didn't care about God or the people, what we have is an inherently corrupt justice system. And when it came to God's will concerning the treatment of widows, everyone knew the answer. There are numerous passages in the Hebrew scriptures that tell us that widows are considered to be among the most destitute of society, right there with orphans, the poor, and immigrants. Because the people in these groups had such shaky positions economically and socially, biblical texts time and again compel people of God to provide provisions for them. Not only were the people of God expected to show care for people like these of such "lowly" social status, but they were also supposed to develop a society with safeguards to protect these people. Safeguards like judges,

who would make sure destitute people weren't exploited. So given that context, we know who in the parable Jesus wants us to root for. The widow is not only being exploited, but she is actively and continually resisting her exploitation. She persists, persists, and persists, knowing that she is in the right and the judge is in the wrong.

Verse 5 is key to how the judge perceives this widow. The NRSV translates the judge as saying, "because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." That, however, is one example of when translators try to smooth over the text in order to make it more palatable to modern readers. Doing so very often eliminates some of the most interesting stuff that the Bible has to say. In the case of this verse, the translators are softening the grit and the spunk of this widow. A verb is used in this sentence means "to give a black eye." Doctor Brittany Wilson offers this better translation: [The judge says,] "Because this widow causes trouble for me, I will give her justice, so that she may not, in the end, give me a black eye."

Jesus is using a boxing metaphor. This widow is putting up a fight. So when you picture this parable in your mind, it is a lot like a political cartoon. In this cartoon, we see a judge standing inside a boxing ring, whose authority is symbolized by his imposing figure and his judicial regalia. Yet then there is drawn a diminutive widow, clearly dressed as one of the least of these. As Jesus is drawing this picture for us, we know that the judge is the epitome of corruption and that the widow is hellbent on receiving her justice. So she is unleashing a barrage of punches on the gigantic judge, now on his heels trying to deflect the onslaught of this tiny woman's justified rage. The word balloon over the judge says, "Alright, I give up! Just don't give me a black eye!" This parable is very humorous, yet it is not comic-relief humor. It is humor that lampoons the powers-that-be in this world who dare to exploit the most destitute in society. This is the underdog story we love. It is the surprise victory that we can all get behind.

Jesus wraps up the parable by saying that God is completely different than this unjust judge. So if we aren't supposed to see God as the judge, then where might we see God in this parable? It is not obvious, but we can find it. At the end of the passage, Jesus contrasts God to

the unjust judge, and then asks, 'Will God delay long in helping those who cry to him day and night?' The implied answer is 'No, God will not delay long.' But then the lesson wraps up with Jesus asking this question: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" And the question is left hanging in the air for us to consider... How do we not lose heart when Jesus doesn't return as soon as many of us would like? What are we to do when God's will is done, but not according to our preferred timetable? Why should we risk our time, energy, money, and even our lives fighting against the wrongs of this world if God's ultimate justice only arrives suddenly at Jesus' return? Those are tough questions, but they are questions that many of us have wondered from time to time.

Jesus wants us to see ourselves in this parable as that widow. She has resolved time and time again to resist the onslaught of bad news that the world throws at her. She will not quietly wait for the full manifestation of God's kingdom while the world that relentlessly beats her down with bad news, heartbreak, and oppression. This widow takes her cues from God. She keeps her vision on what God finds to be good and right. That is her motivation to keep up the good fight. That is her motivation to resist the bad news that the world throws at her time and again.

That leads us to the place in the parable where we can find God fulfilling a role. In this boxing ring analogy, God can be seen in the role of the cornerman, or the coach, of the widow. God keeps us focused, gives us instruction for the match, ministers to our wounds, and cheers us on as we -- like the widow -- step back into the ring for another round of unleashing our righteous fury at this world's wrongs. God cheers us on as we continue the ongoing work of caring for the destitute, forgotten, and marginalized people in society. God cheers us on when the barrage of bad news comes our way. God sits us down, gives us some water, and then looks us in the eye to say, "You can do this. I believe in you." It is good to hear someone say that, right? "I believe in you."

There are two items of communication that you will receive this week. It's by coincidence that they are timed so closely together, but perhaps God is working in that. The first

communication will be the congregation's financial summary of where things stand at the end of the third quarter of the year. When you read the numbers, it is not good news. But take the time to read the whole communication, because even though there is some bad news in there, there is still plenty of room for us to hope. There is room to hope in the fact that this congregation has made it through worse situations in the past, and we certainly will pull through this one too. There is room to hope because -- as you'll read -- the people of this congregation know that valuable and life-changing ministry is taking place through All Saints, and they are stepping up to do their part. And there is room to hope because of the second communication you'll receive this week. It is the letter that officially launches our All In appeal. Read it, and then continue to learn about this appeal in the coming weeks during worship and through other communications. Basically, the appeal is based on the prayerful and diligent discernment of your ministry team leaders, who concluded, "We truly believe these are the ministries that God is calling us to do in 2020." Like the widow, these ministry initiatives are taking their cues from God. Despite any bad news we will be like that widow, keeping our vision on what God finds to be good and right. I believe in this congregation, that you will be able to come together and do this. But don't just take my word for it. The message of today's parable is basically this: God believes in you. Even when you feel worn down by the bad news and the injustices of this world, be like the widow. Keep your focus on the manifestation of God's reign in your midst, despite the setbacks lobbed at you.

Be like the widow. Cry out to God day and night for a just world. Pray persistently that we may witness God's reign in our midst. Yes, bad news will come, but be like the widow, who epitomizes persevering in the faith. Indeed, that is what persistent prayer looks like. God is cheering you on, looking you in the eye, and saying, "You can do this. I believe in you."