Title: *Persistent Faith, Public Witness*
10/19 Sermon – 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Lindsey Odom
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 119: 97-104
Reading from the New Testament: Luke 18:1-8

Prayer of Illumination:
O Lord, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us. Guide us to respond with faithfulness and trust in your promises, through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV)
The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge
18 Then Jesus[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. **2** He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. **3** In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.' **4** For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, **5** yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' "[b] **6** And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. **7** And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? **8** I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Sermon:
When I was at Presbyterian College, I took an American Civil Rights class titled *"Journey to Freedom: Civil Rights and Social Justice in the South."* It included a spring break trip to places such as Atlanta, Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham, New Orleans, and Nashville to explore the history of the Civil Rights Movement by visiting landmarks, engaging in discussion, and learning about the pivotal events that shaped our nation. That trip took me to sacred ground — to places where people prayed, protested, and persevered for the sake of God's justice.

One of the most memorable moments was visiting Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery and attending a worship service there. During that service, a church member named Dr. Ralph Bryson, who has recently passed away, shared an unforgettable testimony about his friendship with Jo Ann Robinson, one of the lesser-known heroes of the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Bryson told how Jo Ann helped begin the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After Rosa Parks' arrest, it was Jo Ann who stayed up all night distributing thousands of pamphlets calling for Black citizens to stop riding the buses. She convinced an entire community to give up something essential and instead walk or carpool because she believed their persistence and advocacy would create change.

Dr. Bryson said that Jo Ann's story "illustrates how the desire on the part of individuals to resist segregation and oppression can be transformed into a mass movement if it is organized and aimed at a specific goal." Then he added something that has never left me: "We must no longer

tolerate things the way they are, but instead join together in God's redemptive work in the world, seeking justice for all."

Friends, having a persistent faith and witness, like Jo Ann Robinson, is the invitation Jesus offers us in Luke 18. Persistent faith endures. A public witness joins together to make God's love visible in our day and time. Jo Ann's story and our scripture passage remind us that faith was never meant to be quiet, complacent, or solitary. True faith is communal. It speaks, acts, organizes, protests, and refuses to give up. Jo Ann's faith and hopes for her community manifested in public witness, just as Jesus describes in the parable of the widow.

Jo Ann's work in the middle of the night handing out pamphlets mirrors the widow's relentless knocking on the judge's door. Her persistence and belief that God's justice could break into an unjust world are exactly what Jesus meant.

In the parable, Jesus tells his disciples to "pray always and not lose heart." He speaks of a widow, a woman without power, privilege, or resources, who keeps coming before a judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Her only option was to go back repeatedly to plead for justice. She showed up often at the gates of the city where the unjust judge held court and pursued him until he finally gave in, not because he was good or just, but because he was tired of her persistence.

This parable is one of the clearest examples of public witness in Scripture. The widow's prayer is not quiet reflection but active, unrelenting faith for justice. Jesus uses her as the model of prayer, for a prayer that persists and does not lose heart.

So let's take a moment to consider:
Who are the unjust judges in our world?
Who are the widows — the vulnerable, crying out for justice?
And how can we be as persistent as the widow in our faith?

The widow shows us that prayer is action, prayer that refuses to end just because the world feels broken or divided. True prayer becomes participation in God's coming reign and Kingdom. Persistence in prayer is rooted in who God is, which is just, merciful, loving, and compassionate.

We "cannot separate who God is and what God does from who we are and what we are called to do," which includes persevering in prayer till it becomes public witness, recognizing that we can count on God to act in justice, we can count on God to hear the ones who have no power, no influence, no voice, we can count on God to hear those who have nowhere else to turn, we can count on God to not always grant our requests, but to hear, with loving, parental patience, the persistent prayers and needs of our heart (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4 Commentary, pg. 193). Knowing this, we are called to keep coming to the unjust judges of our world, and to keep showing up with our petitions, our protests, our prayers. And we do NOT do this alone, but

together. Faithful discipleship is communal. As theologians, Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty write:

> "The separation of Christian life from public affairs creates an artificial boundary between the church and the world. Christianity is not an individualistic faith; Christians are called to live in community and to be active in the world in ways that witness to our faith."

That's the kind of community Jesus envisions — people whose faith leads to faithful action. Prayer and justice are not separate things. The widow's persistence *is* prayer. Her knocking is prayer. Her public witness is prayer.

A Black pastor once told a group of activists after reading this parable: "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not know what prayer is."

That's the heart of this parable. Prayer isn't just words to God, or even communicating with God, allowing ourselves to share our most intimate selves with God; rather, it's faithful, persistent knocking on the world's locked doors, sometimes for years, sometimes for generations, trusting that God still hears, that justice still matters, that love still wins.

These locked doors are all around us. They are the barriers that keep God's children from the fullness of life Christ promises. They are places where injustice lingers, where pain is normalized, where poverty persists, racism wounds, people are turned away because of who they love, and creation groans under neglect.

And yet, our faith keeps knocking, just like the widow who would not give up, believing that even hardened hearts can be moved and locked doors opened. Our faith must not just believe that God will act, but also join God's action in the world. The widow's persistence wasn't passive or quiet, it was prayer in motion and faith embodied through action and courage. The widow reminds us that faith is not only private devotion, but public witness. It's showing up before systems that seem immovable, trusting that God's justice will not remain silent forever.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus himself prayed like this – persistently, fervently, even in anguish in Luke chapter 22, verse 44. And at the end of this parable, Jesus asks a haunting question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (verse 8)

When Jesus returns, will he find faith that still believes prayer can change the world? Will he find faith that is unafraid to disturb unjust powers? Will he find in us a real and living faith, that loves God and loves our neighbors? Will he find faith that fights fatigue, a faith that shows up in community, that marches, that petitions, that knocks and knocks and keeps on knocking, extending kindness, even when it feels like nothing's changing? When the Son of Man comes, will he find justice—or just us? When faith turns to action, what will the Son of Man find?

When the Son of Man comes, will he find the church awake, or asleep in the comfort of our pews, while the vulnerable, the hungry, the imprisoned, the marginalized people still cry for justice at our gates? Will he find faith like Jesus, a persistent, disruptive, justice-seeking, love leading, full of mercy and truth kind of faith?

The widow doesn't win because the judge was good. Rather, she wins because she refused to stop trusting that God is good and that God gives us what is aligned with the character of God. Jesus told this story so we would pray always and not lose heart. The world is still full of unjust judges and systems that dismiss the vulnerable, but this story reminds us that God hears our cries, is still faithfully and attentively listening, and that divine justice still breaks in.

Prayer and persistence are how we learn to care more deeply, to act more boldly, to love more courageously. So, may we go forth allowing our persistence to become our prayer, our faith to become our witness so that when the Son of Man comes, he will find faith that won't let go. May he also find prayer that presents itself in the form of protest. May he find justice that rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. May he find us being persistent and present, wholeheartedly trusting, doing what we were created to do, which includes seeking justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

Friends, this is the calling of this parable — Persistent Faith, Public Witness. The widow teaches us that faith is not passive waiting; rather, it's active persistence. The Black pastor reminds us that prayer is not easy words, it's one that knuckles against locked doors. Additionally, theologians Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty remind us that faith is not private; rather, it is public and that we are called to live in community and to witness to our faith in all areas of life. This is our Reformed heritage as Presbyterians. This is our Gospel calling. So, when the Son of Man comes, may he find a faith that persists, together, for the sake of justice, love, the Kingdom of God. Persistent Faith. Public Witness. May it be so among us. Amen.