

Proper 24, Year C (RCL)
October 20, 2019
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

Genesis 32:22-31
Psalm 121
2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5
Luke 18:1-8

Nevertheless She Persisted

I don't know about you, but I have acquired a new Super Hero in the past few months. She is a pint-sized 16-year-old Badass. Greta Thunberg has captured the hearts of the masses and the sometimes grudging attention of politicians and bureaucrats. But that was not always the case. The movement she has inspired had a slow beginning by any account. In August of 2018, at the age of 15, she was a lone protester sitting outside of the Swedish parliament with a homemade sign declaring her personal "School Strike for Climate." No one joined her in those early days, and she and her parents received considerable criticism for her school strike. But she persisted.

Every Friday, week after week, whatever the weather, she showed up with her sign. And slowly, her message began to catch on with other students in Sweden and elsewhere beginning to join her movement with Friday school strikes dubbed "Fridays for Future." Before long, the movement was international, she was on the cover of Time magazine, she was speaking before the United Nations Climate Change Conference, travelling to the US via a solar powered boat for extensive speaking engagements including a rally in Iowa City, winning prestigious awards and even being nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

She is a doggedly determined champion for scientists and climate change activists, a thorn in the side of many politicians and large corporations, and a role-model for both young and old who want and need to believe that one person's words and actions can make a difference even in a problem as extensive as climate change. Add to this the fact that she is on the Autism spectrum (which she calls her super-power), and has been diagnosed with selective mutism, and her story becomes all the more remarkable. She notes that she only speaks when she really has something important to say. Now is

that time, she says, because the need for climate change is beyond urgent. She rails against those who choose to ignore the warning signs of impending disaster, claiming that we are stealing her future and the futures of our own children and grandchildren. She is speaking out against injustice. And her voice is being heard.

Her story reminds me of another story, this one from February of 2017 when the U.S. Senate debated confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions to become Attorney General. Senator Elizabeth Warren voiced the opinion that Sessions should not be confirmed because she believed that, based on his record on civil rights for Black Americans, his character was contrary to that which is appropriate for an Attorney General. In her speech, she quoted a statement from former Senator Ted Kennedy and a letter written by Coretta Scott King concerning Sessions. She was stopped several times in the course of her speech and warned by the Senate Chair reminding her of Senate Rule XIX about speaking against another senator, but each time, she asked for and received permission to continue. However, as she began to read the letter from Coretta Scott King, Senator Mitch McConnell began talking over her, objecting, not to her words, but to the content of the letter. After a vote along party lines, McConnell's objections were sustained and Warren was asked to take a seat. Later, when interviewed about the incident, McConnell said "Senator Warren was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted." The internet went wild with images not just of Warren and King, but also of Harriet Tubman, Malala Yousafzai, Gabby Giffords, Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton, and even Princess Leia. "Nevertheless, She Persisted" became the rallying cry of women everywhere. Hillary Clinton tweeted, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted. So must we all."

I want to pause for a moment and state clearly that neither my telling of this story in the context of my sermon, nor the t-shirt that I am wearing todayⁱ are intended to endorse any political candidate in the upcoming presidential election. My point is to applaud Senator Warren's perseverance in the face of what she perceived to be an injustice being done in that moment. Though she finally sat down when ordered to do so, she calmly, firmly, and persistently called for justice to be done.

This week, we lost another champion of justice with the death of US Representative Elijah Cummings. A statement released by the NAACP reads, "The NAACP mourns the passing of Congressman Elijah Cummings — a resounding civil rights icon that prevailed in the face of adversity against all odds. As a statesman devoted to Baltimore and the civil rights movement, Congressman Cummings was among the most passionate and spirited members of Congress. He demanded justice on every front and never shied away from standing up for the most vulnerable."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said of Cummings, "In the House, Elijah was our North Star. He was a leader of towering character and integrity, whose stirring voice and steadfast values pushed the Congress and the country to rise always to a higher purpose." Word has it that just hours before his death he was still working, signing off on subpoenas for the White House in the impeachment investigations.

These three stories are examples of the many inspiring stories that could be told of people being passionate about justice and persistent in their pursuit of it. I'm sure that you know of others. I also know that many of you yourselves are tireless and persistent voices for matters of justice about which you care deeply—voting rights, criminal justice reform, racial justice, the environment, gun violence, homelessness, reproductive health, mental health, animal welfare, immigration, food insecurity, healthcare reform—this list names just a few of the passions represented in this room today.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus tells a story of persistence in the face of injustice—this one about a widow who persists in bringing a complaint to a local judge. We aren't told of the exact nature of her complaint, only that she keeps coming, again and again, asking the judge to grant her justice over her opponent. She simply refuses to take "no" for an answer. But as we are told, this judge is not worthy of the office he holds, for he neither fears God nor respects people. So we are not surprised to hear that time and again, he refuses her pleas for help. But finally, he decides that the best way to be rid of her is to grant her request. "I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming," he says to himself. Because of this widow's perseverance, even an unjust judge manages to act justly. Jesus draws a contrast between the unjust judge

and God, saying “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” As Christians, we have faith that God’s justice will prevail.

But that is not the only place we see God in this story. Don’t we see God also in the widow? – not in her powerlessness, but in her persistence. For who is more persistent than God? Despite whatever sins and shortcomings we may have, God pursues and claims us as God’s own. God’s love for us is unrelenting. In the words of Lamentations: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” As Christians, we are people who live in hope, who pray in hope, who act in hope, living toward the day that God’s kingdom will come and God’s will be done. Living in hope against all odds, we work, in whatever ways we can, for the justice and peace that is coming.

At the end of the parable Jesus asks, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Faith, as defined by this parable is persistence in prayer voiced in the hearts of believers and in prayer that is made visible by our persistence in railing against injustice in all its varied forms. When we pray, “Your kingdom come” each week, we are not just asking God to break into our world, we are pledging our own willingness to work tirelessly, persistently with God to fight injustice wherever and whenever we see it. God calls us to persist in being people of hope, people of justice, and people of faith who believe wholeheartedly, against all of the forces that would have us think otherwise, in the goodness and the justice of our God.

Let us pray:

Holy One, through you the impossible becomes possible. You birth hope into inconceivable places: In our greatest pain. In our heaviest grief. In our weightiest battles with injustice. Even when we cannot yet perceive it, your Spirit is at work. Give us the faith, O God, to trust in the mystery of your redemptive hand. Amen.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Note to readers who were not present for the sermon: I wore a “Nevertheless She Persisted” t-shirt with my clerical collar.

ii Prayer from “enfleshed,” a community and online resource that seeks to provide individuals and communities with spiritual and theological resources for liturgy, prayer & contemplation, preaching, teaching, and consulting that speak directly to what matters the most.’