

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Fierce Patience**

“because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually asking.” – *Luke 18:1-8*

It is remarkable, a great preacher once observed, how much of the earth and sky can be reflected in so humble a body of water as a puddle. In the same way, it is remarkable how much of heaven and earth can be reflected in simple biblical stories like the one we just heard.

A widow and a judge. The widow, left behind when her husband died, vulnerable and alone. In a patriarchal society, women alone are marginalized, without power, their voices are silenced or ignored. This widow has no man to speak for her, so her voice alone is easily overlooked, more easily ignored. Someone has taken advantage of her – it happened all the time back then, and it still happens today. Perhaps there was a debt someone owed her husband, and now that he is gone he refuses to pay it back. Perhaps she had some land on which she relies for survival, but someone, knowing her vulnerability, has moved onto her property and is farming it or grazing it without her permission or paying her rent. The law is supposed to prevent such injustices, and judges are supposed to uphold the law. The widow appeals to the judge. All she wants is justice. She asks for nothing else, and nothing less. She has a right to justice, but will she receive it?

The judge, responsible for upholding the law, responsible for administering justice, is lazy or corrupt, neither fearing God nor respecting people. It was not uncommon then. In Canada, I think, it is rare for judges to be so clearly corrupt, but it is not uncommon for the legal system to fail. Justice is supposed to be blind, not influenced by wealth or race or gender or position. The art and sculpture around court buildings often portrays a blindfolded woman. (Show slide one). It is a representation of the Roman goddess Justitia, justice personified. She carries a sword to represent the power to enforce justice and resist injustice, and in each hand



she carries a bowl, representing the importance of balancing and weighing competing claims. (Slide two) Often she is represented with a scale, to make that even clearer. The blindfold represents impartiality. Justice is supposed to be blind to considerations of wealth and power. This next slide shows a controversial sculpture by Audrey Flack



outside a courthouse in Tampa Florida. It is a controversial sculpture because the blindfold has some gaps and flaws. (see picture to the right) If you look carefully, you can see her eyes peaking out between the folds of the blindfold. You and I both know that justice is imperfectly blind. Native people and people of colour are vastly overrepresented in prison and frequently experience difficulty in being heard by courts. Those who have money can



afford the lawyers and the fees and the experts, and those without money simply cannot afford to defend themselves. They often have the choice of

capitulating or going bankrupt. Get sued by a corporation and you are in trouble. The scales of balance are very responsive to how deep your pockets are.

There is a family I know who were being subjected to what I would call legal abuse - they are involved in a legal dispute with someone with a lot more money. They had to get a lawyer, a lawyer they could not afford. The case is malicious and has no basis in law, they are assured by their lawyer, but the other party has money to spend, and so every week there is a new issue raised, something to which their lawyer has to respond and for which they have to pay him. They are financially devastated and emotionally exhausted. Charles Dicken's novel *Bleak House* tells the story of two young orphans whose estate is tied up for so long in court that by the time the case is resolved they are fully grown, and there is absolutely nothing left of the estate that should have sustained them.

Justice is not always blind. And it certainly wasn't for this widow in Jesus' story. Her opponent was taking advantage of her, and the judge should have been there to enforce the law. Unfortunately, she was unimportant, and she was easy to ignore, except for one thing. She was persistent. She kept the pressure on. She kept visiting him, reminding him of her case. She pounded on his door when he wanted to sit at home with a glass of wine and watch television. She wrote him letters. She camped out in front of his office. She made a sign calling attention to her case so that everyone who came to see this judge would know that she was waiting for him to act. She called a television station and got

featured on The Fifth Estate. She Facebooked and Twittered and YouTubed and used every method at her disposal to call attention to the injustice she had suffered and to put pressure on a judge who would not respond to anything less. In telling this story, Jesus is acknowledging an ageless truth: that we often cannot depend on those in power to do what is right. Unless there is pressure applied on them, they will often take the easy way out, and the easy way is often the unjust way.

The widow is not alone. Throughout history, people who want justice have had to be persistent, because if you aren't important, your voice may not be heard unless you make yourself annoying, unless you nag. This past week, the Kurds have been in the crosshairs of the Turkish military because the American president decided they weren't important enough to defend. IN Argentina and Chile, when people who were inconvenient to the government went missing, mothers and wives would demonstrate in the main squares, calling attention to their missing relatives, demanding information and justice. Often it took years, but sometimes they got what they were looking for. Persistence paid off, sometimes.

In the 1960s the Dryden Pulp and Paper Company discharged about 9000kg of mercury into the river that fed the Grassy Narrows reserve. By 1970, the people of Grassy Narrows started showing signs of mercury poisoning, but nearly 50 years later, they are still waiting for justice, still waiting for a water treatment plant, still waiting for compensation. They are not alone. Many indigenous groups in Alberta and British Columbia have quietly and persistently asked for justice: for a treaty, for a reserve, for compensation for the disruptions to their way of life caused by development on their traditional lands. Persistence has not paid off, yet.

In Alberta, the Lubicon Lake band was missed during the treaty process on the prairies. They protested, demonstrated and demanded their rights as indigenous people, while development continued on their traditional lands. Finally, just last year, they got their treaty, land for a reserve and compensation. It took 120 years of persistence.

Around the world, and here in Red Deer, persistence pays off, not immediately, not easily, not predictably, but it pays off. Even in the face of the most brutal violence, racism and oppression, steadfast and courageous persistence in calling for justice can move mountains. In the British Empire, the persistence of William Wilberforce led to the end of the slave trade in the British Empire. In Canada, the persistence of the famous five Albertan women, led to women being granted all the rights of persons and the end of

legal sexism in Canada. In India, the persistence of Mahatma Ghandi and his followers led the British Empire to surrender the most lucrative jewel in its empire. In the southern States, the persistence of Martin Luther King and his followers ended the entrenched system of segregation that had oppressed blacks for generations. In Southern Africa, the persistence of Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and anti-apartheid activists around the world led to the end of apartheid and the first democratically elected government in that country. In the United Church, the persistence of gay and lesbian people and their friends and family has slowly helped us to more fully embody the unconditional nature of God's love. In Red Deer, the persistence of people like Dot Towns and Dorothy Corney and Alice Williamson, among others, led to Red Deer adopting the designation of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, and the persistence of Lyle Keewatin-Richards and Don Hepburn, working with many others, has led to the Alberta Government recognizing the cemetery of the Red Deer Industrial School as a protected area. In Canada, many persistent advocates for justice, some on the right and some on the left, are focused on tomorrow's election. Maybe soon some will get their way. Perhaps we will get fair prices for our oil. Perhaps we will get a national pharmacare programme. People seeking justice have often had to battle fierce, sometimes violent opposition. But they have persisted, and their persistence has brought forth transformation.

This little story about a persistent widow and a corrupt judge mirrors so much of what happens on earth. It also mirrors what happens in heaven. We have a persistent God whose great desire is for his creation to experience justice and peace. The first few chapters of Genesis tell the story of violence and injustice spoiling God's creation. God's first response is an impatient and violent one. He decides to wipe everything out with a flood and start over. But that doesn't work. No sooner do Noah's family get off the boat than they get into trouble, so God tries a new strategy. God chooses to pursue justice through a single family, that of Abram and Sarai. God blesses this couple as part of a long-term strategy, so that through them, and their descendents, the world can be transformed. The story of Abram and Sarai is the beginning of a story of a God who is fiercely patient, who is determined to bring about justice, though it take generations and millennia, who knows that persistence will be required, and sacrifice and the slow work of transforming hearts and minds and souls. When we pray, when we work for justice, we align our hearts and minds and souls with this fiercely patient God, trusting that persistence will pay off, that justice and peace will come one day.

God does not give up. But will we? "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" That is up to you and to me. Only we can answer that question!