

Pentecost 19, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

20th October, 2019

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 CEV / Luke 18:1-8 NRSV



Have you heard of tiny Melinda Mae,
 Who ate a monstrous whale?
 She thought she could,
 She said she would,
 So she started in right at the tail.
 And everyone said, "You're much too small,"
 But that didn't bother Melinda at all,
 She took little bites and she chewed very slow,
 Just like a good girl should...
 ...and in eighty-nine years she ate that whale
 Because she said she would!

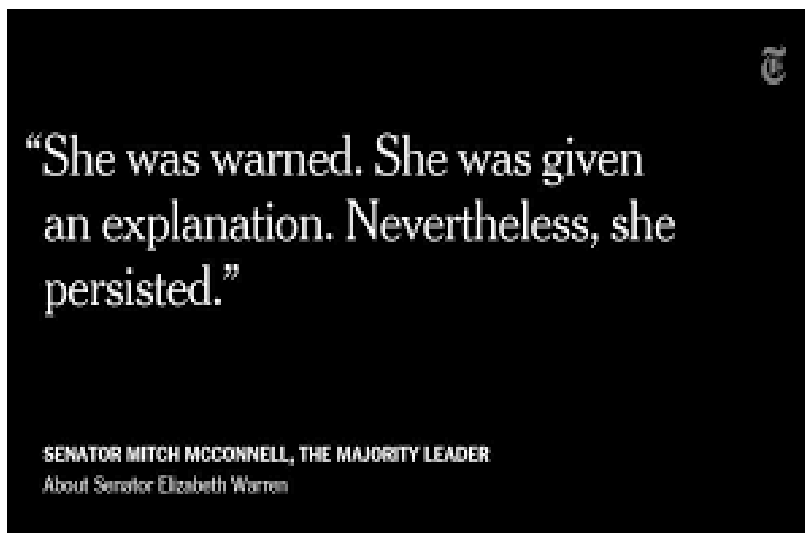


I'd like to start this morning by sharing a little poem

by the famous children's author Shel Silverstein called "Melinda Mae."

A simple humorous story about being persistent,

about striving unwaveringly towards a goal,
 which she reached eighty-some years later.
 Now that also brings up the question
 of how she preserved that whale for so long,
 but I'm sure there's some Scandinavian tricks
 involving fermentation of some kind to reach that goal. Blech.
 But nevertheless, she persisted.



Now some of you may remember when this line I borrowed for my sermon title
 became a mantra for many feminiist groups a couple of years ago.
 When Senator Elizabeth Warren’s objections
 to the confirmation of Attorney General candidate Jeff Sessions
 were officially silenced by the Senate,
 the Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell
 said she was warned to cease her objections,
 “nevertheless she persisted.”
 That then became a rallying cry

for the burgeoning Women's March movement.



This morning's texts are all about persistence,
about holding fast to the course no matter how rough the ride gets.
Jesus relates a story of a widow
who continued to seek justice from an uncaring judge
who didn't respect anybody.
Yet her persistence becomes such an irritation to him,
that he grants her justice just to get some peace.



History abounds with those who have persisted seeking justice.
People like: Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.,

who persisted against the injustice of segregation and racism;



Mahatma Gandhi

who persisted against the injustice of British oppression in India;

and Archbishop Oscar Romero



who persisted in speaking out

about the injustice of civil war

on the poor and marginalized of El Salvador.

Some of these, like our widow in our story today,

realized some success and resolution,

though it should be pointed out

that three of the four met their end by an assassin's bullet.

The widow in our story today knows what it is to suffer injustice.

After all, she's someone in the margins of Jesus' day.

Without a male relative to act on her behalf,

she cannot pursue any means of resolution

in the normal day-to-day business

or honor systems of her culture.

Her only recourse is to petition the courts if she is not being treated fairly

and rely on seeking justice in that arena.

And her persistence is rewarded, if for no other reason

than the sheer annoyance and irritation her persistence has caused.

Jesus uses this illustration to point out

that if persistence can spur an uncaring, callous human judge to action,

how much easier will it be to get divine interaction

from a caring, loving God who wants to provide for us.

Jesus teaches to take our issues to our Creator

who will quickly provide justice to us.

Those are definitely words of hope for those

who yearn for justice under the yolk of oppression and poverty,

as many of Jesus' audience were all too familiar with.

But is that the reality we see?

How does that play out in our observations and life experiences?

Often it seems as though the unjust judges of this world

and those that benefit from their rulings,
seem to do as well as, if not better
than those who cry out to God
and patiently wait for a divine word or action.

The rich seem to die comfortably in their satin-sheeted beds
while the homeless die whimpering in the street.

We live in a world where children die senselessly,
natural disasters take thousands of innocent lives,
and millions suffer and die from violence, hunger, and neglect,
around the world and in our own country.

It can beg the question, where is the God who unlike the unjust judge,
provides justice quickly?

Unfortunately, when we ponder this question,
it can be all too easy to try to justify God's apparent inaction
on some fault or shortcoming of those who cry out for relief.

Particularly those of us who have spent most of our lives
benefiting from the relative security of a white, middle class existence
can have a hard time understanding
how people can find themselves mired in such dire circumstances.

It can be tempting to suppose
that they must be paying for their own moral shortcomings in some way,
that they are in need of repentance
for the sinful transgressions that is the cause of their lot in life.

There are certainly plenty of voices to be heard today
promoting such perspectives.

We hear of all the “bad hombres” seeking sanctuary on our shores
from the brutal violence and poverty of their homelands.

And on the flip side, we have others promoting a theology
that says if you aren’t rich and successful,

then you aren’t faithful enough,

that you need to pray harder and live purer lives

then you too will reap the financial rewards of your faith.

Paul warns Timothy in our first reading today of those types of false teachers,

who will tell people what they want to hear,

something that gets them off the hook

from living the lives of witness they are called to,

voices that make the status quo legitimate

and require nothing more of the faithful.

Yet we still are faced with the same question, does prayer really work?

Well, there are two points I’d like us to consider.

First, is prayer just a request line to God to solve all our problems
or is there more to it?

C.S. Lewis once said,

“I pray because the need flows out of me all the time,

waking and sleeping.

Prayer doesn’t change God, it changes me.”

To pray effectively, to truly give our concerns to God,
can have a profound effect.

When we stop trying to manage the problem
and trying achieve the solution we ourselves have devised,
and put our trust in God,

not only do we unload the stress and worry,

we are also open to other possibilities

that we may have never remotely considered.

The second thought I'd like us to consider

is our call to persist in faithful action as well.

In 2 Timothy, Paul counsels Timothy

to keep the faith by maintaining his preaching and witness,

even if it's not the popular thing to do,

even if it leads to finding yourself in the minority,

in the margins.

There are many ways to witness to a gospel

based on love and justice for all,

not just a call to ministerial evangelism and preaching like Timothy.

As we try to reconcile the promise of a God

who will provide justice

with the reality of the multitudes, who unlike the widow,

go to their graves without receiving justice,

maybe the answer we seek is found not in what we should expect from God,
but rather how we struggle, as did the widow,
for justice,
even in the hopelessness of not seeing that justice in our lifetime.

Rather than waiting for God to meet our needs,
are we not called to do justice for,
and meet the needs of the disenfranchised among us,
to meet the needs of others?

You've heard me say many times before,
we are the body of Christ in a very literal sense.

Rather than waiting for a miracle from God,
are we called to be the miracle for which others are praying?

Make no mistake, to be persistent in seeking justice can be exhausting,
and disheartening as well, especially in the time in which we live.

It can seem like we are lone voices in the wilderness,
and there seems to be no impact to our efforts.

Hopeless as it may seem at times,
we are called to be persistent in seeking justice,
not because it is easy or because in the end we will win;
we are called to seek justice, regardless of the consequences,
for the sake of justice.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that "the arc of time is long,
but it bends towards justice.

It has been said that persistence is like wrestling a gorilla.

You don't quit when you get tired. You quit when the gorilla gets tired.

I pray we never cease praying and never tire of the persistence of faith we are called to.

May we strive to be the change God intends us to be in this world,

and perhaps even the answer to prayers of others. Amen.