

October 20, 2019 | Journey worship

TEXT: [Luke 18:1–8](#)

TITLE: Door is Difficult – Keep Trying

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

As anyone knows who lives in an old house, or in our case, worships in an old church building, not everything in our houses works perfectly. There are cupboard doors that squeak, radiators that rattle, and faucets that drip. One female pastor tells the story of visiting a church and having to use the restroom. On one of the stall doors she found a sign hanging there that said: Door is difficult—keep trying. I guess sometimes the lock would stick and it needed serious jiggling and cajoling to work properly. Being locked in that stall wasn't a time for panic or despair; rather the sign reminded her to just be patient and persistent and the door would open eventually.

I especially like the word choices on that bathroom sign. It didn't say, "Door is broken. Door is faulty." Those options simply put the blame on someone else, as in "If the door is broken or doesn't work properly, why doesn't someone simply fix it?" No, the sign is honest without casting blame: "Door is difficult," just like you and I can at times be difficult. The message on how to deal with this is clear: Things can be difficult—Keep trying.

Luke 18 opens with a parable Jesus told in order to remind us about our need to pray and not to lose heart. We meet two characters—a cantankerous judge and a persistent widow—who are almost comedic in their actions. Twice we're told that the judge neither feared God nor was a respecter of persons. It is one thing to be an impartial judge who isn't swayed by status, society or peer pressure. It is another thing to be stubborn, hardhearted, and generally impious. When this grouchy magistrate finally gives in to the widow's request, he admits that his motivation is simply to get her out of his face. In fact, while the English translation simply says that he doesn't want her to "wear me out," the actual Greek means he doesn't want her to pommel him in the face or give him a black eye. Maybe the widow was pretty good at boxing!

We're not told why the widow needed to be heard by the judge. In truth, the details about her court case aren't important here. What does matter is that she has no advocate; she's a vulnerable woman in a male-dominated world, a single person and widow in a culture that privileges families. It appears that she has no other resources at her disposal except a firm resolve and steadfast will to fight for justice. Showing care for widows, orphans and immigrants was always a biblical litmus test for how well people are following the laws of the Lord. If our work for social justice offers consistent, faithful care to those on the margins of life, then there is hope that it is also being lived out in the mainstream and common places of our life together.

It's also important to note that in this parable, the widow is persistent but not obstinate. There's a big difference. The old preacher Henry Ward Beecher once said, "The difference between perseverance and obstinacy is that one comes from a strong will, but the others comes from a strong won't." The widow's persistence is an Old

Testament type of faith, one that names out loud to God the very things we've come to expect from God, praying they will come to pass in this, the Lord's world. It's remembering out loud what is important about our faith and insisting that God walk with us so that (in the words from the Lord's Prayer) God's will is done "on earth as it is in heaven." It's like these verses from Psalm 80: *O God, let your face shine that we may be saved. You brought a (grape)vine out of Egypt. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? Turn again, O God; have regard for this vine that we may be saved.*" It is basically praying "God you are righteous and I know your will is for the good of your children. So hurry to grant us your justice."

At the end of the parable, Jesus re-enters the discussion and says, "If this judge finally does what is right, will not the Lord act quickly to grant you justice and bring you relief?" This is a common type of argument used in scripture. It involves a movement from a lesser to a greater example: If this unrighteous judge eventually does what is right for bad reasons, imagine how much more the righteous God will do out of love for us. On one hand there is a crooked old judge who refuses to hear an old woman's case because there's nothing in it for him, but who eventually relents to get her out of his hair. By contrast, there is God who will do much more than we ask when we find ourselves in need, or especially when we seek justice in an unjust, broken world, because that is the nature of God's realm made real here on earth.

Now there are many reasons to feel discouraged about the state of the human race and to be discouraged about whether we are leaving a better world for our children to inherit. There are countless examples around us of injustice raining down on innocent heads, of wealth disparity harming God's children, of war and environmental degradation wounding souls and spirits here and around the world. In addition to all that, we remember our somber legacy of institutional racism in this country—of justice delayed that become justice denied. Preacher Fred Craddock has described how an elderly African American preacher once read this parable slowly and then offered a one-sentence interpretation, saying "Until you have stood for years knocking on a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is."

Too many people think the church exists to peddle a prosperity gospel of "You can get it all now." When this packs folks into the pews, it's seen as effective marketing, instead of being recognized as unbiblical heresy. The religion scholar Huston Smith once wrote, "When the consequences of belief are worldly goods, fixating on these things turns religion into a shopping mall for self-gratification and churches into personal fitness clubs. But this is the opposite of religion's role, which is to de-center the ego, not pander to its desires." To de-center the ego. To move us from the spotlight of personal prayer, even though our words are heartfelt and our needs are real, so that we will remember to pray about something larger than us. Something like laws that respect the widow and the marginalized; something like working now for the sake of God's beloved community in the world; praying built upon the confidence that knows weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning—because God's promises are sure and God will move quickly to grant justice.

Our tendency is to label every stuck door in life as being broken, faulty, and someone else's responsibility to fix. But our faith actually challenges us to take a different approach by saying "the door is difficult—keep trying." Yes, we are tired and saddened by wars in this world. We have endured terrorist attacks like 9/11 and white nationalist terrorist attacks like the Tree of Life shooting. We are frustrated by money and resources going to social media channels of hate and fossil fuel addictions. We have obstinate politicians blocking all progress and incompetent politicians literally treating, for example, innocent Kurds as worthless pawns in someone else's war games. We are tired of knocking on doors of racism and prejudice with bloody knuckles. We are unsure whether anything we do or say ultimately makes a difference.

But the opening line of this parable sticks with us—Jesus telling us about the widow and the judge that we might remember our need to pray always and not to lose heart. So we look at the doors before us and remember they're not broken, but difficult. They're not beyond hope, but by God's grace, they're actually redeemable. So we bang on the doors. We jiggle the locks. We pray and preach and march and vote and practice our faith in God as persistently as we know how. Why? Because in this life you will face a lot of difficult doors. You know this from experience. It is hard to get old. It is hard to navigate choices about health care and housing, to balance caring for kids who grow up so fast and parents who slow down and can't drive at night and need us suddenly more than ever. It's hard to stay honest at work when dishonesty seems to pay bigger dividends and laziness seems to be rewarded with smaller workloads. It can be hard to work on our relationships when silence and secrets seem like easier options than real honesty and re-building trust. But when confronted by life's difficult doors, we're called to persevere—over and over again. See, perseverance isn't running one long race; it's many short races run one after the other, ever keeping our eyes on the finish line of faith.

The door may be difficult, but we are to keep praying and working and not lose heart. For the one who knows our needs even before we ask, who intercedes for us with signs too deep for words, who (unlike the grumpy judge) always hears our cries for justice and is quick and anxious to respond—that same Lord is with us always, on both sides of the doors of life.

Jesus' final question was this: When the Son of Man comes in glory, will he find faith on earth? Well, if we remember to serve the God who is on both sides of the difficult doors of life—and to pray persistently for justice—then yes, I trust the Savior will find faith when he comes in glory.

AMEN