

As a child in church, I remember the pews and being tucked in between Mom and Dad. I remember discovering the little pencils and the blank cards I could draw on. I remember going up for children sermons, occasionally embarrassing my parents and sister. I remember singing. I remember coming to the prayers of the people - what I understood to be “the long boring part” - and then the passing of the peace. That was always fun. People would greet me with the peace of Christ and I would say that back to them. A little strange but nice too.

What came next was the offering. I remember getting to put whatever my parents handed me (usually a check or an envelope) in the plate as it came around. I remember receiving the plate and passing it to the next person. These were good things. But what I’ve been remembering most this week is the feeling that came with that moment of offering in the service.

It was like things returned to normal for a minute. The “real” world was still out there, and it briefly came in, reminding us that it had power, even here. There was the sense that this money stuff had nothing to do with the rest of what we were doing in church. I remember it feeling like we put down whatever “air” we had been breathing to that point - like we let out a collective exhale for those few minutes. As the adults reached for their wallets and purses, we stopped “doing church” for a minute, and stepped back into the “real” world. We stopped being in the presence of God.

We would pick it up again with the liturgy around communion, but that almost made the shift a little more pronounced - that little gap, a hiccup, in the service.

We have some great readings today. A key moment in the book of Genesis where Jacob wrestles with a man who leaves him with a wound, a blessing and a new name. A much beloved psalm with a message dear to where we stand as a congregation today - "From where will help come? From the Lord who made heaven and earth." And from 2nd Timothy where "Paul" encourages the faith and the work of faith in Timothy - passing to the next generation what he had first received.

So far these readings are all about persistence in the face of adversity. Jacob persists in wrestling this man, refusing to let him go. The psalmist persists in faith that all help comes from the Lord. And Paul's solemn urging of Timothy: "proclaim the message; be persistent..."

Jesus' parable follows the theme. He tells it to them that they might persist in prayer and "not lose heart." The widow's persistence in appealing to the uncaring judge is a model of persistence for the disciples. The judge gives her what she's after, but only to get her off his back! "How much more will God grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry to God day and night?" Jesus asks. God will quickly grant justice and without delay. But, he finishes, "when the son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" In other words, will people persist in faith, even after their requests have been granted?

Thinking about persistence this week, I started thinking about it in terms of another word - in terms of Practice. Could there be a connection? You musicians in the crowd know that you need to persist at practice to improve. True enough. But I began thinking of practice as more powerful than persistence - because you only persist until you reach your goal. Once the end is near you have nothing to keep you persisting except 'will power' - and what power is that at all? But 'Practice,' carries a power all its own. Practice any behavior long enough, it can actually hold you (keep you on track) when persistence fails.

It seems pretty clear that Jesus is encouraging us to be more like the widow. She's a woman well practiced at persistence, an example to live by. But I heard a question this week that I haven't been able to shake. Here it is... "What if we see God in the story, not as the judge, but as the widow? What if Jesus is the widow?"

Hearing the question, we immediately go looking for who we are in the story. With a limited number of roles, we are cast as the judge! If the glove fits, right? Unjust, neither fearing God nor having any respect for human beings. As long as we're going there, I'd add "or the natural world" to the list. The widow appeals, again and again. She wants justice. Who do we know who wants justice? God wants justice.

Just hang in here with me for a second.

This way of reading the story stirs the imagination a bit, doesn't it? The good news in it bubbles to the surface right quick: God persists (keeps at us) even when we stonewall God at every turn. But eventually, inevitably, because God never gives up on us, we relent - maybe not for the best reason, but God will take it, **because here's the thing**: God takes our relenting and transforms it. That relenting, that giving in, becomes for us something else - **It becomes 'practice.'** We might be absolutely no good at it the first time we try it - whether it's giving in to mercy, forgiveness, compassion. But for this judge, because of this widow, maybe it will be just a little easier to "give in" the next time he gets the chance.

The possibility that Jesus takes our "giving in" and transforms it into a moment we can repeat and practice sounds like good news to me, because it's clear this judge needs redeeming, am I right? Jesus came to save him too, didn't he? I need to imagine that seeing the relief and joy and gratitude on the face of this widow at his granting her request, that his heart grew just a little bigger - just big enough to want to try that again sometime. For this judge, it would certainly take practice to get better at being just, but doesn't that path of practice then begin sounding like discipleship?

You may have noticed that I haven't continued with the liturgy spotlights I was giving you this summer - highlighting and describing certain pieces of the liturgy as we come upon them in the service. I'll tell you what happened with that another time. But let me turn to the liturgy as a whole now.

The liturgy (what we "do" in worship) is practice. The whole thing. It leads us in the practice of confession. It puts the words of prayer, of song, of lament, of rejoicing, of scripture, and thanksgiving on our lips and in our mouths, again and again. Subjecting ourselves to worship, to God, in this Lutheran form is practice. **Practice for what, you ask?** Practice, dear ones, for when (out there) we have the need to confess, for when we need to lament - let out our pain and despair and angst at all the horror that continues in the world, unabated. Practice, dear ones (ingrained behavior) helps us when we need to rejoice, for when rejoicing is called for. Practice keeps the words, the sounds, the songs and the hope that sings ready at hand. This liturgy thing is the practice of giving thanks even in the face of adversity, of anxiety. The reading and hearing of scripture every week turns us toward the word of God and the good news of Jesus Christ, again and again, so we can have it and share it throughout our lives.

This worship practice takes practice. But the God given effect of that practice is that we are shaped, molded into a people who give thanks, who aren't afraid to confess and ask for forgiveness, and who are unafraid of death. Here, we are shaped into people who can look at the brutality of the world, put the language of lament on their lips and speak the questions everyone is silently asking. The world needs people like that - the world needs you, Messiah - and the world needs communities and practices that teach us how to be such people.

And there is no place in the liturgy more important to the creation of such people, the molding and shaping of such people, than that of the offering.

Did you know that Jesus talks more about money than anything else in the gospels? You wonder why until you look around the world today and see the obsession, the driving, unyielding persistence to Make More that has produced 500 billionaires over the course of the pandemic. Jesus saw who we were and he pointed it out every chance he got in order to wrestle us from the grip of this all consuming power that money has over us.

The reality is we need money to live, to work, to thrive. But the truth we know (that Jesus knew) is that it so easily obstructs that thriving, our own thriving and that of others. So we come to church: We confess, we sing, we pray, we hear, we speak, and we come to the offering.

Into a simple basket we practice parting with this thing that seeks our most fierce allegiance and loyalty. We give what the world tells us is too precious to share. We literally offer up, for whatever reason we do, a way of sustaining our church, of serving people in the wider community. We practice giving that we might learn to trust God with our deepest needs; needs that money can't satisfy. We practice giving that what we have might be passed on to the next generation - all that we have first received. In this way, what we are practicing in the offering, is the emptying of self that emulates the shape of the Christian life - It's the "Here am I. Send me" of Isaiah, and it's quiet, firm faith in the face of death.

Does this liturgical moment sound like a "hiccup" in the service anymore? A moment of sober clarity as the world steps in, reminding us of its truest values? Or does it sound, in the context of worship, nearly central?

In the end, it can still involve tremendous wrestling, this practice. But instead of Jacob hanging on for dear life in order to receive a blessing, we release and relent, finding God's deepest blessing - the reminder of our true name, our firmest identity, and our surest hope throughout our lives in baptismal promise: Beloved children of God.

AMEN