

You know, I have a pretty good arm. I'm thinking that when Brady retires as QB for the Patriots that they'd take me. I'm a logical thinker, pretty quick on my feet, and I know something about football strategy. So, what do you think? If I persistently go about applying for the job, and if I pray a lot about it, it's bound to happen, right? After all, the widow won her case in front of the unjust judge and Jesus said that whatever you ask in prayer will be granted.

Today's sermon is about persistence, but as you can tell from my little example, persistence alone is not always a virtue. Someone can be persistent to a fault, can't they. Persistence must be accompanied by a desire to know and do God's will. There's got to be a balance between persistence and acceptance, between these two slogans: *Just do it!* and *Let go and let God*.

This is no little topic, nor is it no little feat to balance these two. People have left the church and some have lost all faith in God over this problem.

In Luke's Gospel today we hear about the widow who went to the judge over and over again and he would not listen to her. There are four or five laws in the Torah that specifically say how widows are to be treated and respected. But these laws were written on paper and not on the hearts of the people.

Widows were mistreated, ignored and considered to be nothing in society. In ancient societies where you either pull your weight or you're a burden on a family, widows were at the bottom of the barrel. This poor widow in this story can't even get the respect of modern interpreters of the Bible. The story is always called the Parable of the Unjust Judge instead of the Parable of the Persistent Widow. But the widow is the hero of the story!

Let's give this woman a name and give her story a little life. That practice in Hebrew is called Midrash. So this is a midrash on the story of the Persistent Widow. I'll call her Tilda and tell you that she had lived a good life and had a husband and children. Life seemed joyous as her laughing children filled the house, and her husband worked hard and they had plenty to eat and many friends. All was well, that is, until the children left home. Her daughter moved away to another city with her husband. Her son was killed in a skirmish while fighting over a trivial matter. And then the worst blow, her husband died in an accident in the fields leaving her poor and alone with no family, and no one to care for her. Her relatives wouldn't take her in because they had no room, and no food to spare for her.

She pulled herself together, and made a little living by doing sewing for others. It wasn't much, but it kept her from starving. There was a young man who lived next door named Eben who helped her get food every week from the town market. At harvest time, Tilda paid Eben some coins in advance out of her meager savings for a full bag of grain to last her through the winter. The young man, couldn't stand hearing those coins jingling in his pocket and he wasted them on gambling. He figured that the old woman couldn't tell the difference, so brought her a small bag of half rotted wheat. She thought to herself, "I may be old and weak, but I'm not stupid. I can see well enough that Eben cheated me." Talking to the young man directly did no good whatsoever. She had to do something. She would starve over the winter with this measly amount of bad grain, and she had given Eben most of her savings. She made a decision.

"I'll go to the judge to get justice against this young man who cheated me. Judges are the fairest and most honest. They know the law. Surely, the judge will help me in this situation." So, she went and waited her turn in the busy court to present her case. When her name was finally called she got up out of her seat, took her cane and walked up to the judge.

As she tried to present her case the judge seemed preoccupied with something else. He didn't seem to be listening, and wouldn't even look up at her. "I have no time for this case," he yelled before she had even finished speaking. "There are many more grievous cases for me to hear. Go away! Solve this yourself."

A court clerk took her by the arm and hustled her towards the door. But as she went, she could see that the next case seemed to involve a well dressed couple and they had an advocate who was speaking for them and presenting their case.

If only she had someone to help her, to get justice for her, even just to listen to her. She went home and cried. "God, why are you punishing me? You've taken my children, my husband and now I cannot even get someone to listen to me when Eben stole my money. Is this a punishment for my impatience with my family? Is this a punishment for not praying enough?" Then she scarcely could put her greatest fear into words...is this punishment for what my father did long ago. You know what they say. 'The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.'"

The next day, she was still miserable, but she made herself go to meet with several elderly friends who talked and sewed together. She voiced her fears to her friends that she had been thinking to herself ever since she had gotten home from the court. "Is this God's plan for me to have everything taken away from me, and I die with nothing?" "Is God giving me no Justice in this because my past mistakes, or my father's past mistakes?"

Her friends counseled her. "Of course not, Tilda. God would not punish you like that. The prophet Jeremiah has told us that God is not like that. Go see that judge again. Make him listen to you." It helped Tilda to have the encouragement of her friends. She dried her tears and made a decision to keep going back to the judge until he granted her justice. And so she did. Day after day she returned to the court and made sure that her name was on the list of cases to be heard. Day after day the judge ignored her, and sent her away.

All her friends, but particularly her friend Eunice, continued to encourage her. She reached out and took Tilda's hand and looked in her eyes. "Keep at it, Tilda. Wear him down!" She felt as though she never would have had the courage or fortitude to keep going to the court again, and again, if it hadn't been for her friends. It became a job for her, each day getting up, getting dressed and going to court and sitting to wait her turn.

Finally, after months of this, the judge said, "Alright, Tilda. I really couldn't care less about you or your silly case. I have not gained any respect for you, but I am just so tired of seeing you in my court. So, I'll grant you what you ask. The man Eber must bring you a full bag of good wheat. Case closed. Get out of here once and for all."

Tilda felt twenty years younger as she made her way home. Tears of joy ran down her face. She had gotten her wheat, yes, and she had received justice, even from an unjust judge. But that wasn't what made her cry. It was that God had listened to her prayers. It may have taken months and months, but God kept her going by holding her hand and speaking through her friends, "Keep at it Tilda. God hasn't abandoned you, friend."

And the friends were right. The more Tilda thought about it, the more she realized that yes, God listened to her. She came to see that the way God kept her going was by using the voices and the affection of her friends.

The gradual hymn that we just sang helps us remember that we have to temper persistence with allowing God to let us know what God's will is in a particular situation. The example of me wanting to be a quarterback is a little extreme. It's a black and white case of misguided persistence. Most of our issues day by day are about things that are much more in the gray area.

I remember that during my process to become ordained to the priesthood I met a rather large roadblock in the form of the interim priest at my sponsoring parish. She did not think that I was priest material and took steps to see to it that I would not be able to move along in the

process. I was faced with a dilemma. Was this woman telling me God's will for me in this matter. Had my discernment committee and I been foolish to ever consider that I could be a priest? I prayed. I cried. I talked to my bishop, to my AA sponsor, to a therapist, trusted friends, and I tried to hear God's voice in all of this. I had to find some peace in a balance of openness to God's will and persistence to reach my goal. I just kept putting one foot in front of the other in the direction that I thought God called me to go. Many encouraged me to keep on, and not give up. I don't think I could have continued if I had not heard God's voice speaking through people who knew me well, and seemed to know better than I did what God's will really was.

Each of us faces these difficulties as we go through life. We need to be willing and persistent, and we must pray for the grace to have those virtues. And what will God give us? Of course, God will give us guidance and grace . God will give us opportunities in which to be persistent.

"Thou didst reach forth thy hand and mine enfold; I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea. Twas not so much that I on thee took hold, as thou, dear Lord, on me."

Verse 2, Hymn 689, Hymnal 1982