

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 20, 2019

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## “God Keeps Asking”

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Scripture: Luke 18:1-8; 19 Pentecost C (Proper 24)

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So, you all know it's that time of year in the Episcopal Church... when the air grows cooler, the leaves turn colors... and the leadership starts asking for money. It's Stewardship season, and I figure that maybe many preachers around the Church today couldn't ask for a better set up for a Stewardship sermon —right?— than the parable of this pesky widow who overwhelms the unjust judge with her persistent nagging until she gets what she wants, even if the judge doesn't want to give it. I bet preachers all over the country will come out swinging in the pulpits this morning with just that message, trying to pester their congregations into making their financial pledges, working persistently, asking, cajoling, imploring, maybe even a little shaming, just to get people to open their wallets even if they don't want to. Just to push them, like that widow who wore out that unjust judge until... *Fine, I'll contribute! Just stop asking.* Persistence will be their message, and they will persevere and pester until their congregations ante up.

But within our community of faith of St. Stephen's Church, there are a couple problems with that approach, I'm glad to say. First... in the time I have served with you, we've not needed to nag and pester for our members to share generously of their means. When asked, you have given, willingly, generously, with a sense of appreciation for our life of faith together and to secure both present and future for this church. Thank you for that. And, of course, I encourage you to continue your good spiritual practice by promising to give a portion of your financial means to St. Stephen's Church for the coming year. And if you are not pledging and giving to the life and ministries of this church, I invite you to join in that spiritual practice as a means of showing gratitude to God and caring for each other. There it is... an encouraging invitation, rather than a persistent nagging. I am grateful that we as a church have been able of late to be more persistent in saying "Thank you" than being persistently pestering for money.

Second, this parable?... I don't think it's about pesky persistence anyway. It's really about God's grace. Life is hard. I don't understand why it must be so. But I know things don't always go as we want or need them to go. It's as if life persistently puts challenges in our way and then dares us to remain hopeful. Our plans don't always work out as we envision. Our good health goes bad sometimes, and we have to deal with it. Work can become unsatisfying, relationships struggle, the world

around us can seem dreary or frightening. I'm not saying life is all bad; I'm saying the we are truly like pioneers, making our way along a path of life that can bring incredible joys but can also bring hardships. There are twists and turns in the road that we cannot always foresee. We don't always know where life is taking us. And sometimes that's just plain hard. And Jesus knows that. So he is encouraging his followers, he is encouraging us, to not lose heart. Don't give up. Don't stop praying. Don't stop talking with God. Stay the course and keep the faith, even when the going is tough. And this story of the unjust judge tells us exactly what God is *not* like, and the pesky widow is exactly what we need *not* become. *If that judge who couldn't care less about the widow gives in to her just because she bothers him until he wears out, well... Jesus says, how much more can we expect that the God who does care for us deeply is already at work giving us the strength and the hope and perseverance we need to move through our times of trial?* Sure, it can be hard to see that God is with us. But we have to go through the forest in order to get out of the trees. We have to navigate the gloom until we see the light again. But in this story, I hear Jesus saying, *Ask, and you will receive. You need not beg and pester. Just stick with me. God will make a way for you.* And you know, I don't know that we always get what we want, but I surely live in the hope that we are getting what we need, whatever is possible for us, so we can heal and carry on.

So, I suggested that I don't really think this parable is about pesky persistence, but maybe is sort of is, though not in the way I have often thought about it. The parable is often read like an allegory, right? It's the widow who is pesky and persistent, because the Judge won't listen to her. So, we're supposed to be like that widow and wear out the Judge (who is like God) until we get what we are after. But... Thomas Keating was a Benedictine monk who spent a little time reflecting upon this parable of the Unjust Judge and the Relentless Widow, and he did indeed find in it a little unjustness and a lot of persistence. But I really appreciate the way he reads the story, because Keating asks us to see *ourselves* as the ones who can sometimes be that unjust and uncaring judge, and God is the pesky widow who just won't leave us alone:

"...wait until you encounter how many ways of communicating God can come up with," says Keating. "God approaches us all day long. coming to meet us morning, noon, and night through people, events and our own thoughts, feelings, memories, and reactions. We accept [God] finally, not because we are just and deserve it, but because at some point, like the unjust judge, we cannot stand the importunities of grace anymore and are forced to give in saying, 'Okay, [God,] take my life. I am in your hands.'"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gleaned from [Synthesis](#) for October 20, 2019.

Maybe the parable is telling us that it is God who is continually coming to us, persistently inviting us to persevere in a life of faith. There is an encouraging invitation.