

Seeking Justice? Be Persistent!
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“Seeking Justice? Be Persistent!” Pilgrim Church UCC, October 16, 2016, Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Luke 18:1-8)

The first time I ever voted in Massachusetts I'm pretty sure that the woman handing out ballots at the polls thought I was a lunatic. Here's why—in my home state of Ohio there were some voting laws passed that makes voting more complicated. All of this goes back to the 2004 Presidential election (George W. Bush vs. John Kerry) where voters had to wait in long lines in disproportionately poor and predominately African American communities. The Ohio General Assembly took action to expand voters' access to provisional ballots and absentee ballots to ensure that everyone's vote would count and the 2004 debacle would not happen again. But the laws all changed in 2014 and became voter suppression laws quite frankly. A federal judge declared two of these new voting laws unconstitutional in June, saying that they violate the Voting Rights Act. Just last month the United States Supreme Court refused to intervene after that judgment was appealed and the 2014 voting laws remain in place. Ohio being the battleground state and swing state it is, voting laws really matter and are really political.

So I showed up at Cary Hall years ago by now with my driver's license in hand (because you had to show photo ID to vote at that time in Ohio) and a manila folder full of papers to show all my proper documentation that I am now a resident of Massachusetts and a registered voter. Please let me vote! The nice woman working asked for my address, my name, checked me off the list, handed me the ballot, and that was it. I was baffled and asked, “That's it?” And that's when she looked at me like I was a lunatic because that's probably how it seemed from her perspective. But it was shocking that it's so easy to vote here, and isn't that rather sad?

This presidential election cycle has been unbelievable on so many levels, and access to voting matters a whole lot because Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump have vastly different ideas for the future of our country. This will be the fourth time I will vote for our next President—first presidential election I could vote in was George W. Bush vs. John Kerry in 2004. Filled out my Ohio absentee ballot while living down in North Carolina and cast my vote. Now most of you have been through more presidential elections than me (not trying to make a dig about anyone's age!) and have more experience with the political rhetoric one hears during the campaign season. But this is the most anxiety-producing downright nasty election in my memory though maybe you can think of worse ones?

It's troubling to consider what will happen to our country on November 9th because of how divisive this election has become and the hateful rhetoric we are hearing from presidential candidates and all sorts of politicians. Lord, we are going to need some serious healing as a nation. This is one of those moments where people's voices do need to be heard in our democracy. We have no right to complain about the outcome if we don't exercise our right to vote. And it's worrisome when there are laws in place that makes voting more difficult for people, especially people who may not have a whole lot of power in our society, especially maybe unconstitutional voting laws in swing states. We can get all worked up because the stakes are so high right now.

When Jesus tells the story of that widow and the unjust judge in the Gospel of Luke we might want to sit up a little straighter and pay attention to who that widow is in our society right now. And what are we supposed to do to help her demand justice? Jesus tells us that there's this widow who would have been disenfranchised in Jesus' society because well, patriarchy! She

relentlessly goes to this judge who doesn't have a good relationship with God or a good relationship with the people he's supposed to be serving. And she keeps saying to him over and over, "Grant me justice against my opponent."^[1]

We don't know what the conflict is all about—we just know that this widow will not give up until she gets justice. She is relentless. She is persistent. She is not going away until the judge makes things right. Meanwhile the judge gets annoyed because she won't leave him alone. He gives in not because he wants to make things right, but because she's bugging him so much. "Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."^[2]

Jesus uses this parable to urge his followers to keep the faith. Keep asking God for justice. Don't give up on what you know to be right in your heart. Be persistent. When you see injustice, sometimes you gotta roll up your sleeves and demand to be heard.

Think of the Bread and Roses strike that took place in Lawrence in 1912 (which I have shared with you before because it's local history and it's fascinating!) At that time, a victory had been won by workers when legislation was passed to reduce the work week from 56 to 54 hours. Can you even imagine working in a mill for 54 hours per week? But employers in the Lawrence Mills reacted to the legislation by slashing wages. The Mill Owners assumed that the workers wouldn't be happy about the pay cuts, but they didn't anticipate organized retaliation.

At the time, many women immigrants were working in the mills, speaking various languages. The Mill Owners assumed that the workers couldn't organize! 14,000 workers walked off the job in the first week of The Bread and Roses Strike, followed by 9,000 in the weeks to come. The Industrial Workers of the World helped orchestrate and lead the strike and various Women's Neighborhood Associations helped organize the striking workers and their families. After a violent confrontation with police assaulting women and children, public opinion overwhelmingly favored the workers. Eventually the Mill Owners came to terms with those who fought for their rights, mostly women immigrants. The widow Jesus praises in our parable today would have been so proud! The name of the strike came from James Oppenheim's poem "Bread and Roses" which declared:

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead.

Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread.

Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.

Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for roses, too.^[3]

Don't we sometimes have those moments where we just feel tired and don't want to fight for bread let alone for roses? This whole seeking justice thing is hard! Back to those voting laws for a second, some of them went into effect in Ohio in 2014.^[4] And here in 2016 they are declared unconstitutional, but then get appealed to the Supreme Court who won't hear the case and the election is in twenty-some days. So the laws stand. And if you happen to oppose them—do you keep fighting? Do you keep demanding justice? Do you go to the polls and somehow help those folks who want to vote be able to vote? Jesus would tell us to be persistent when we are about the work of justice. Keep praying for justice and be like that widow and show up and demand justice if your voice gets silenced by those in power. Perhaps we have a responsibility if we are in positions of power to help folks out here.

The great Christian pastor and theologian William Sloane Coffin once said,

“Had I but one wish for the churches of America I think it would be that they come to see the difference between charity and justice.

Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice, a matter of public policy.

Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it.

Charity in no way affects the status quo, while justice leads inevitably to political confrontation.”[5]

Churches tend to be good at charity, but justice makes us a little uncomfortable because justice gets political. We are allowed in the church to take a stand on issues, but we are not allowed to endorse a particular candidate. Sometimes even taking stands on issues can be scary. And yet there are moments when our faith demands that we not be silent in the face of injustice. We can look to the widow and those women in the Lawrence mills and take heart. We can look to these women and get courage from their persistence. In the face of injustice, you have to be persistent. Sometimes we cry to God day and night. Sometimes we show up day in and day out and demand justice.

One of the slogans you consistently hear in protest movements is “no justice, no peace.” It’s not easy to get at the root problems of injustice in our society. These are scary times, these are divisive times, these are anxiety-ridden times, these are downright mean and nasty times. And it’s understandable if we look around and get completely overwhelmed by the injustice— not even knowing where to begin here! But if we decide that we are about the work of justice as individuals or as a congregation, persistence is key to making change. May it be so with us. And please make sure to vote! Amen.

[1] Luke 18:3, NRSV.

[2] Luke 18:5.

[3] “1912 Bread and Roses Strike,” Massachusetts AFL-CIO, <http://www.massafcio.org/1912-bread-and-roses-strike>

[4] The Associated Press, “Federal Judge Says 2 Ohio Voting Laws are Unconstitutional,” June 7, 2016, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/08/us/federal-judge-says-2-ohio-voting-la...>

[5] William Sloane Coffin, Credo, 62.