



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “THERE’S POWER IN PERSISTENCE”

Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Luke 18:1-8

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, August 18, 2019  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” ’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What brings us to this service of worship today? Is it a desire to worship the Living God? Are we here because we’re always here, because it is an important part of our weekly routine? Are we here because we set aside a special period of time whereby we prayed for the children and friends of our church family and called upon God to bless them? Perhaps we are drawn to this place because our own heart is filled to overflowing with thanksgiving for God’s blessings in our life; and so this is a place where we come with a spirit of gratitude.

But maybe that’s not it at all. Maybe ours is a heart that is broken - filled with more questions than answers, more struggle than peace, more doubt than faith. Maybe we can’t put our finger on it, but we somehow know that this is where we are supposed to be.

There is no denying that we each have our own motivations for being here this morning; but, know this, if it were not for the fact that God came by here in the sense that God actually came to us, were it not for the Word being made flesh and dwelling among us full of grace and truth...and living and dying and rising again; if it were not for God’s love, not a single one of us would be in this sacred place!

But we are! And for those who gather in this sanctuary as followers of Jesus Christ – we know that, at some point, and at some level of our spiritual consciousness, God called to us...called us

by name! Such is the marvelous gift of God's grace, that very special work of the Holy Spirit; and, the promptings of the God's Holy Spirit, they prevail upon us continuously, relentlessly...to the point that among the various things we can say about the nature of God's love, we can say beyond the shadow of a doubt that God's love is wonderfully persistent.

God's love is like a shepherd who has a hundred sheep, and, losing one of them, stops everything and goes after the one that is lost until it is found. God's love is like that precious soul who has ten silver coins, and, losing one of them, lights a lamp and sweeps the house until the coin is found. God's love is like that Father who sees the Prodigal Son from a distance and runs to meet him and embraces him and rejoices!

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning we find yet another example of the persistence of God's love. Several times God calls to Samuel, but it wasn't until after the third time, and also with Eli's help, that Samuel realizes who it is. Upon being called a fourth time, Samuel responds, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Ah, be it a third time, a fourth time, a hundredth time...God has revealed to us throughout the expanse of the Biblical narrative that there is absolutely no limit to that divine determination to be our God and for us to be God's people.

But do you know what else God has revealed? If we are to truly live as God's people – if we are to understand what it means to live together as heirs of the gracious gift of life – then we too will need to be persistent...persistent in love, in faith, and, yes, even in our prayers.

Author Evan Thomas wrote a biography of Edward Bennett Williams, who was a wealthy and legendary lawyer; a man who, at one time, owned both the Washington Redskins football team and the Baltimore Orioles baseball team. In his book, Thomas tells the story of the time Mother Teresa visited Williams, because she was raising money for AIDS hospice work. Williams happened to be in charge of a small charitable foundation at the time, and Mother Teresa hoped that he would be gracious enough to help fund her efforts.

Before she arrived for her appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich: "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." They decided to be polite and to hear her out, but they also had every intention of ultimately telling her, "No. Thank you."

In the book, Thomas describes Mother Teresa as a "little sparrow" sitting there on the other side of a large wooden mahogany desk. She made her appeal for the hospice and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but, no!" Mother Teresa simply said, "Let us pray." Williams looked at Dietrich, and they bowed their heads, and, after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again, Williams politely said, "no." And, with that, Mother Teresa simply said, once again, "Let us pray." At that point Williams kindly said, "All right, all right. Let me get my checkbook" (Tom Long, *Praying without Losing Heart*)!

I wonder how truly persistent we are with our prayers! Oh, I suspect that sometimes we are bold and honest and persistent, but, I dare say, that many times we are not. Maybe we feel like

we've been neglected or that our prayers have gone unanswered. And while there is much more to say on that matter, for our purposes today, it must suffice to say that that is not God's position on the matter, and our feelings of discontent do not at all reflect the very heart of God that is continually inclined toward us...for God is the one whose face shines upon us and is gracious to us...the one who lifts his countenance upon us and gives us peace!

That is what the woman in our New Testament Lesson needed more than anything else – an advocate, someone who could look after her welfare – someone who could grant her justice! But that is not at all what she got, for hers was a judge who honored neither God nor life...he didn't volunteer with Hands of Christ. He never showed up for a Habitat work day. But what's worse, he seemed altogether content to neglect this woman, this widow, this dear soul with no status and no power whatsoever – this judge was determined to deprive her of justice...ah, but she was determined too, wasn't she!

(Knock, knock) "Whose there?" "Me, your honor. Grant me justice against my opponent." "Get out of here."

(Knock, knock) "Come in. Oh, it's you again. What do you want now?" "Help me your honor. Give me justice." "Leave already."

(Knock, knock) "Grrr, come in. What now?" "Your honor, I have nowhere else to turn! Please help me." "I've already told you...I have no time for you. Go."

(Knock, knock) "For crying out loud...Alright, fine. I will grant [you] justice so that [you] may not wear me out by continually coming."

Isn't it amazing that the woman in our parable wore the judge down. We wouldn't be too far off the mark to say that she nagged him to death. Now, to be clear...God is not at all being likened to an unjust judge! This is a parable, first and foremost, about prayer, but it is also a story about the God who hears our prayers, that righteous judge who has revealed himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The point is this: if the prayers of a widow were eventually heard by a judge who cared not for the least of these, someone who had no sense of God's decrees for the powerless, friends, if that kind of judge can hear someone's prayers, how much more – how much more – will God, who spared not his own son for our sake, not only hear our prayers, but also grant us justice.

I've had several conversations of late about the violence that we can so readily see in our society today, especially the violence which at times, is perpetuated against children -- violence initiated by people with greed or guns or water or words...such actions which bear living witness to the fact that there is simply no limit to the depravity of the human soul.

There are a great many people who understand full well that there is no earthly judge or jury who can truly hear and respond to our concerns; that no amount of policy reform or political legislation – as helpful as it may be – none of that can change the human heart; none of that can stop the moral slippage along our seemingly terminal path of secularization; indeed, none of that can awaken our spirits to God's eternal decrees of justice and peace!

I can tell you that from those conversations, two things have emerged for me...and these may not be reflective of how you might feel called to respond in your own life, but these are the ways that such prayerful reflections have manifested themselves in my own life.

The first is a personal decision to spend a little bit of my time each week with children in our community who may not have the kind of family support system that so many of us take for granted. My hope is that God would use me, even for a brief amount of time, to positively impact the spiritual welfare of our country during its most impressionable years. And, if through such efforts, even one child hears a hopeful word, a kind word...a word which, by God's grace, makes a difference in their life now or in the years to come, then that will have been time very well spent.

And the second thing is this: I'm going to try and be more passionate and persistent in my own prayer life. And I'm not just going to pray for justice; I'm also going to pray for mercy. Because, whether we care to admit it or not, we have contributed mightily to the situations in which we find ourselves. Make no mistake about it, oftentimes, we are not the ones in need of justice, we are the ones who deserve it! Yet, praise be to God, what we receive in Christ Jesus, our Lord, is mercy!

Now, I don't know exactly what your journey of faith looks like, and I don't know what your prayers sound like, but God does; which is to say that our prayers have never been a matter of alerting God to our needs...God knows exactly what they are.

No! More to the point, prayer among other things, is about developing in us the kind of persistent faith that never stops coming to God – never stops praying or asking questions or seeking answers...never stops letting it be known everything, everything that is in our hearts and on our minds, knowing all the while, that the reason we can be persistent at all, is because God was first persistent with us. In this way, there is great power in persistence; but lest we forget, that power belongs to God; and yet, God has given us the key to unlocking that power on this side of heaven.

In the end, God provides us the blessed opportunity to learn something about God and our neighbor and ourselves that will simply come by no other means save the prayerful and penitent appeals to God...and so we pray...again, and again, and again (Knock, knock). Will you bow your heads with me?

Lord, God Almighty, grant unto your people justice...and grant also unto your people mercy! May we never lose heart after we strive to live as faithful witnesses to the incredible difference that Jesus makes in the lives of those who love him. Speak, Dear Lord, for your servants are listening...In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*