I wrote a portion of this sermon in the reading room of my hometown library yesterday. I was in town for my 45th high school reunion. The public library in Ansonia, CT is a stately stone building located directly across the street from Christ Episcopal Church, where I grew up and I spent most afternoons in one or both of those historic buildings.

This was where we all hung out, studying and finding quiet corners amongst the beautifully crafted oak stacks for quiet (and often not so quiet) conversations. As I sat in that space that seemed both familiar and new to me, I grew curious about the history of the building. I learned on their website that both my church and the public library were dedicated in 1896, though the actual completion of the library building was in 1892.

Caroline Phelps Stokes, a wealthy direct descendent of Anson Phelps, the man who founded Ansonia, wished to make a benefaction to the town. The library, which was actually dedicated on June 9, 1892, sat vacant for four years because the town fathers refused to provide the $1,500 per year toward the library’s operating expenses. Finally, in 1896, the town administrators relented and voted the annual $1,500 appropriation, and the library opened that year with a collection of 1515 books.

As I read this history, I could just imagine a group of dedicated citizens coming persistently before the town council, time after time, never giving up, insisting that the town take their part in equipping their fellow Ansonians for learning and enrichment. They never gave up, never stopped working toward what they believed.

Jesus told his followers this parable we hear today. “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had any respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent’.”

We have come to know that it is typical of Luke to focus on those who are left out, left behind, on the fringes, the widow, the poor, the stranger, the other. After all, Luke is the Gospel that begins with the Magnificat, Mary’s song. The world turning toward justice; Tyrants removed from their thrones, the poor lifted up and fed.

But, this judge, who holds all the power, appears to be all that we would NOT want to see in a judge. This official, who by Jewish law and custom, **should be the ally and protector of widows**, doesn’t care about her or even, we are told, about God.

This woman, powerless in her society by any measure, uses the only true weapons at her disposal to obtain justice against a corrupt power –her voice, her persistence and the truth. She is the very example of clarity of purpose, getting up every day, dressing and traveling to the court, banging on the judge’s door and making her needs known - loudly and insistently.

The wording we see in most scripture translations, including our own, softens the actual Greek description of the woman’s interaction with the unjust judge. The judge eventually relents by exclaiming that, rather than *“wearing me out”,* his actual statement is *“so that she will not give me a black eye”.* That’s a bit more forceful, don't you think? It carries with it a visible sign of public shaming, embarrassment, and revelation of corruption.

So….I think this parable can be confusing. I mean, this judge can’t be a representation of God as I have experienced God. God is good. God cares about all God has created. No, this judge is not God, in fact he is the very opposite of God. But what about this notion of persistence, insistence, even nagging God in prayer?

In this case it’s important to note the wider setting of this parable. Jesus is foreseeing weariness in faith that his followers will face after he has left them. Waiting for his return, waiting for the Kingdom of God to appear, he knows they will likely fall prey to discouragement in the midst of their longing. Jesus tells them to that to endure they must “pray always” and not “lose heart”. And he wonders out loud if anyone will have the resilience of faith necessary to endure the wait until he returns.

“Paul” is also present to the reality that Timothy, and other followers that he has taught along “The Way”, will find themselves tiring and be tempted to fall off the path of persistence as they too await the return of Christ. His message, to them, and to us, the reminder that God has breathed into scripture all that we will need to live in faith, to be equipped for every good work through Christ, is more than timely.

Persistence can be exhausting. Maintaining a level of positive energy when it seems like what we say or pray for falls on deaf ears can seem a daunting exercise in keeping the faith. Losing heart, finding ourselves dis-couraged, that’s exactly what losing heart (Cor, in Latin) means. Weariness, resignation, numbness and despair. We are all susceptible to this. Especially when we feel we aren’t being heard or that our pleas and prayers for justice are ignored by those we have trusted to listen and act on our behalf.

I have to admit that I was just a bit nervous about attending my reunion. I don’t have a lot of very fond memories of my high school years. I was not exactly a pillar of self-confidence. But perhaps that’s the very definition of teenage hood. Back then, I was more likely to be a follower than one who spoke out. Much has changed over the years and I’m definitely bolder, and in my own way, more confident in expressing and living out my beliefs. I pray those actions today are informed and inspired by God’s Word in a way that might be identified by Jesus as faithful.

But I also am very familiar with those “itching ears” that Paul writes about today. That’s a great expression… “Itching ears”. It seems to me to be the perfect description of leaning into the exhaustion of what seems like unanswered hopes and efforts. Having our prayers unanswered hurts and baffles us. We can lose heart.

When it seems as though the battle for justice and reconciliation is too hard and it feels like our singular efforts are not going to make a difference, that’s when unsound doctrine and alluring myths can start to make some kind of crazy sense, or provide easy excuses for inaction even in the face of what we know to be evil. Or, worse yet, we resign ourselves that change will never happen, so why pray at all.

Bob and I were away last weekend at a family wedding. We had some time to tour a bit around East TN. As we walked through the city of Kingsport, in a truly decimated downtown, filled with empty storefronts and closed businesses, we turned a corner and there on the side of a brick building, 20 feet high and 30 feet long was a banner filled with individual pictures of the 659 endangered species of birds that have been identified in the US to date. There was very little text that accompanied the pictures, other than identifying the names of each bird, but none was really needed. It was a striking and sobering sight.

Then when we returned home, I was visiting with two friends and the topic of endangered and threatened birds in NH entered our conversation. Did you know that the Common Loon is listed as a threatened species? Can you imagine NH without the Common Loon? It is **very** distressing, and the Loon is only one of 17 species of bird listed as threatened or endangered in NH due to environmental impacts.

We are presented with many predicaments, worries, causes that vie for our attention, and they are ALL important and the need feels so immediate and intense. And compassion fatigue is an absolute reality. When we hold up the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, it is not to make us feel guilty that we aren’t praying or doing “enough”. But the truth of the matter, what we find in the cross and the resurrection, is that hope still exists even when we feel hopeless, even when redemption feels outside our reach.

The unfair conditions under which the widow seeks justice is an arduous path. She must make a daily choice to expose her condition publicly, to be humiliated once again, to be turned away. Would you not begin to doubt the effort, lose trust in the possibility of resolution, of justice? Prayer, Jesus tells us is the answer to protect us from failing and broken hearts. It is our nourishment, the bread for the soul’s journey. The writer of 2 Timothy encourages persistence again and again, *“whether the time is favorable or unfavorable”.*

And nevertheless, the widow’s faith persists, and for us, she is THE example of prayer in action and of living in the hope of the Kin-dom of God. If the unjust judge can be moved to do the right thing, then how much more can we rely upon God to be our just judge? The reason **we** can be persistent is because God is persistent, calling us to Godself time and time again.

So, take heart, and do not unjustly judge yourself, and don't allow yourself to worry so much about the “right way to pray”. There are many ways…. pray in silence and pray in action. Pray alone and pray with others. Pray in the public square. Our prayer is not so much dependent on us, but on the one to whom we pray. As a wise person once told me, pray as you can, not as you can’t, just keep on praying.

Amen.