

## **Sermon on the Parable of the Unjust Steward**

**For St. Paul's Carroll Street, Brooklyn NYC**

**October 16, 2022**

The parable that we just heard from the Gospel of Luke is often called the Parable of the Unjust Judge. It's one of the few parables of Jesus in which the meaning of the story is explicitly explained at the beginning.

The writer of Luke says here: "Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Jesus explains this instruction through the story of an unjust judge who is being badgered by a local widow to decide a dispute in her favor.

I have to tell you; I found myself, quite surprisingly, in the role of the unjust judge over the past two and a half years. Only three months after my election as the Superior of the Community of St. John Baptist, I was faced with the agonizing decision to close down our ministry of hospitality which normally serves over 2000 people a year.

On March 13, 2020, I had to announce to the public that our retreat house and convent would be closed until further notice. At the time, I – like many other people, thought the closure would only last a couple of weeks or at the worst a couple of months.

After the announcement, I got an email from a longtime Associate of CSJB, Barbara Jensen, who is a much-beloved deacon in the diocese of New Jersey. Barbara said that she was very sad we had to shut down, but that she understood. She asked me to let her know when we decided to open up again.

After that, I started getting emails, and chats, and little comments under our posts on the CSJB Facebook page, from Barbara every few weeks, asking when she could come visit us again. She missed us, she said, and it was very hard on her to be unable to visit. Each time I would tell her "I know it's tough but hang in there. We will open up again. I promise." and I felt like the worst person in the world. I felt like the unjust judge. I felt horrible telling the public that our core ministry – which had the potential to provide so much shelter and solace in this frightening and chaotic world, was not available to them.

As the weeks turned into months and the months turned into years, I started to lose heart. I prayed that the COVID numbers would decrease enough to allow our vulnerable convent population to once again welcome guests. We managed to reopen the retreat house after 18 months, but our Convent remained closed. Every few weeks, I'd hear from Barbara. I thought that she would wait to hear from me, but

Barbara didn't want to do that. She wanted to keep checking in. Even as I was starting to lose heart, Barbara was not. She kept trying.

This parable is about prayer. It's about our ability to keep the faith even in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Barbara kept the faith. She believed that if she just kept asking in her persistent, gentle way she would eventually receive the answer she was looking for. She didn't sit back and wait for an answer from me. She kept asking and in doing so, she gave me a tremendously helpful lesson about prayer.

This pandemic has gone on far longer than any of us ever expected. The problems of our world seem to have multiplied and intensified in this pressure-cooker of crisis. Our endurance strengthens, then falters, as we face situations we never could have possibly imagined in the relative safety and stability of our pre-COVID lives.

Back in March 2020, when the enormity of the crisis first sunk in for me, I would sometimes go upstairs, sit on my bed and cry as I prayed this simple 4-word prayer: "God, please help us." I prayed it often – every day – for a long time. Then my endurance faltered, and I stopped praying that particular prayer. It was Barbara Jenson who reminded me to take it up again. Her persistence motivated me to be persistent in my petitions to God.

The unjust judge in this story relents and deals with the widow's petition not because he is a good person and has compassion, but because he's sick of listening to her.

"Because this widow keeps bothering me," he says, "I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."

Jesus tells us to pray always and not to lose heart. If even the inherently flawed people of this world can grant petitions, he says, how much more can our loving and all-powerful God grant our petitions?

Last week, after two and a half long years, I granted Barbara Jensen her request. All the Sisters had finally agreed to reopen our Convent to day guests, and Barbara was allowed to help celebrate the Eucharist and preach in our chapel. Our joy, and Barbara's joy, was overflowing.

What are you praying for these days? What have you prayed for in the past and then given up when you didn't see any result? Do you feel like it's useless to ask God for something, or that you aren't allowed to ask more than once or twice? Do you feel like God isn't listening?

Jesus tells us that God is always listening, and that we should pray always and not lose heart. Our prayers may not be answered in the way we want. God may not give us what we think we need. God may answer our prayers for the healing of a loved one by receiving them into glory rather than by healing them here on earth. God may not answer my daily prayers for an end to oppression and violence in my lifetime but may instead grant them several generations after I am gone.

We may not see the results we expect, or see results in our human time frame, but our loving Creator is always listening.

Pray always, and do not lose heart. We must believe, and we must persist. We are a people of hope. Our God is a God of hope – a God who says, “I know things look really terrible out there right now but please believe me – I DO have a plan.”

Barbara Jenson was granted her request. The persistent widow got her request.

This has been a long and debilitating journey for us all, but we are a people of hope. Let us keep praying for better times, and for a better world, in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

Two and half years later, we are still here, and we are still keeping the faith.