

GUIDING LIGHTS: RECLAIMING EVERYDAY VIRTUES

Keep Knocking - Justice

Luke 18:1-8

September 28, 2025

I have never been what you would call handy. Just ask my family what happens when I try to fix a sink. It turns out, you can make it worse.

When I was in college, our Presbyterian student group participated in a spring break build with the local Habitat for Humanity chapter. I signed up, but I also clearly described my qualifications and my experience. None and none. I arrived the first day and was assigned by our project leader to the front door. Now, I assumed this was because it was a beginner-level project, matching my skills and experience. Doors are just rectangles with hinges and a few screws, right? Wrong. Very, very wrong.

It turns out that hanging a door properly is far more complicated than it looks. You might know this, but the frame must be measured perfectly. The door has to be level, or it won't swing correctly. And the hinges must be positioned precisely.

Here's what I learned: if you rush the job, the door won't work. It might even look fine, but over time it will sag, stick, refuse to latch or open. And so, we worked and reworked until it swung true. I was absurdly proud of that front door.

But it isn't the carpentry I most remember from that spring break. What sticks with me two decades later are the homeowners: a mother and her fifteen-year-old son. Their story was both heartbreaking and hopeful. Escaping domestic violence, they spent months living in a car, then the floor of a friend's apartment. The home we were building would be the first safe place for that fifteen-year-old to call his own. His mother worked longer and harder than any of us volunteers. For me, it was a college service project—a good way to spend a spring break. For her, it was the way out. I remember how she made sure that front door opened and shut just as it had been designed. And I remember how

she made sure the lock worked, too. That physical door represented a new chapter in a much longer story—years of knocking on other doors, seeking help, demanding safety, refusing to give up until she could build something permanent for her son.

This is a sermon about justice. We all know that word is fractured right now. It is contested, and it is weaponized. To some, it means restoring a kind of order. For others, it captures the call to turn the system upside down. It inspires, and it threatens.

But the justice we pursue this morning must transcend our tribal loyalty. It is the uncompromising vision we find in Deuteronomy's law and in the gospels, where Jesus centers the persistence of one woman demanding what is right.

This is a sermon about prayer. This is a sermon about faith that keeps knocking, about hope that will not give up.

Jesus told a story so that his disciples would remember to pray always and not to lose heart, to persistently petition God with hopeful hearts. At least, that's how Luke introduces the parable, which is why the story itself might unsettle us when we hear it for the first time. It's a short story. There are only two characters. There is an unjust judge—that's all we know about the judge. He fears neither God nor humans. And there is a widow seeking justice. How are we to interpret this parable?

Is Jesus comparing God to an unjust judge? Are our prayers being reduced to desperate pleading? Must we beg God to listen to our righteous requests?

You have to read the parable through the lens of Luke's gospel. From beginning to end, Luke's story centers those pushed to the margins. His picture of God's kingdom begins at the back of the line. In this story, Jesus is using

a common rabbinical technique, known in Hebrew as *kal v'chomer*. It's the logic behind the rhetorical question: *how much more?* If human injustice yields to relentless persistence, *how much more* will God's justice respond to our call? In other words, divine justice is infinitely more responsive. The text asserts God's eagerness, not reluctance. I want you to keep that in mind.

Of course, the hero of this story is the widow. Suffice to say, that alone would have gotten the attention of an ancient audience. The Greek word for widow is *chera*, which means literally *bereft*. To be a widow is to be a woman without. Without a husband, yes, but also without protection, without income, without a voice in the public square or even in the courts. Yet here she is, demanding what the law guaranteed but common practice ignored. She keeps coming back. She keeps knocking, though she has no power. She embodies hope that will not give up.

Knocking on the door of power and demanding justice—not charity, not pity, not a handout—justice. What is rightfully hers.

And that, I think, is what makes her prayer so potent, so dangerous: she's not praying that God would grant her patience to endure injustice. She's demanding what she deserves—and right now.

I think the persistent widow shines light on a truth we often miss. You may have noticed that whenever tragedy strikes, we immediately hear competing, distinct voices: some of those voices lift up "thoughts and prayers" while others demand "action now." But the widow refuses this false choice. In her words and in her actions, she shows that prayer without work is hollow, but work without prayer burns out. Her activism is prayerful, and her prayers compel action. The two are threads of the same fabric, woven together in her life of faith.

She doesn't just annoy the judge with her persistence. She threatens him, the one thing he values: his reputation. The Greek here suggests she's giving him a public black eye. In other words, she is shining a scorching light on his injustice.

Persistent prayer turns petition to mission. To pray as Jesus teaches us is to let our lives become the Spirit's answer.

Action depends on prayer. It roots our work in God's justice, rather than our own strength. It sustains us when quick victories do not come. Prayer grounds us in God's power.

We have seen testimony of this truth right here.

In just a few moments, as we do every single Sunday, we will pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." That petition is also a summons. What we ask for ourselves, we also ask for all who lack it. And so, that prayer does not cease at the benediction. Once you have prayed for daily bread, you cannot ignore hunger in your community. That's why, three days a week, neighbors receive a warm welcome, bags of groceries, hygiene supplies, and household necessities right here in this building—850 families every month. Daily bread.

But we also know that daily bread is more than groceries. If charity feeds hungry bodies, justice asks why our neighbors are hungry.

We pray for those who lack daily bread, and then we work to change the conditions that keep some hungry. Right here in Washington Township, half of public-school students rely on free lunch. In the Crooked Creek neighborhood, 41% of families are below the level of poverty—a reminder that neighbors close to home are struggling. That's why we launched the Thriving Families Initiative: building cross-class community so economic mobility can grow through relationships, not just service.

The question is not whether we should pray. The question is whether our prayers move us toward places of pain. The question is whether our prayers transform us, make us bolder in our faith.

This is a house of prayer. Here we ask God for peace and healing, for reconciliation and justice. But will those prayers change us? Will they make us as persistent as the widow? Will they drive us to keep knocking on doors that must open?

Jesus closes this story with an ominous, probing question. *When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?* Will faith persist until his return, or will it be crushed by indifference and cruelty? *Will he find faith on earth?* I hear the voice of Jesus in our own time.

Will I find churches that pray for peace and then work to end violence? Will I find disciples who pray for reconciliation and then build bridges? Will I find communities who pray for the hungry and advocate to end poverty? Will I find believers who pray for their neighbors and then welcome the anxious stranger? Will I find faith that knocks on the doors of injustice until they open? Will I find faith that refuses to lose heart?

No, the widow didn't have any power. She had something much mightier. She knew the Word of God that says, "Pursue justice." *Justice shalt thou pursue.* And she did. She refused to accept her oppression as a permanent condition.

And I think Jesus is looking for disciples who pray like her. I think God is waiting for a church that prays like that.

Do you remember the promise tucked inside this tough little story? God is not the unjust judge. *How much more* will God—who knows your name and hears your cry—grant justice to all who put their lives on the line in prayer?

Friends, God is eager to answer prayers that compel our action. So don't you dare stop knocking.

Knock for the child who goes to school hungry. Knock for the elderly couple choosing between medicine and groceries. Knock for the families trembling at borders and those grieving inexplicable loss. Knock for the veteran sleeping on the street and the mother escaping violence in her own home. Knock for a nation in need of reconciliation that only prayer makes possible. Knock for the soul of a nation spiraling toward self-destruction. Knock for your own soul seeking salvation from the snare of evil.

Keep knocking until your knuckles are bare. Keep praying until your voice is sore. The doors of injustice are strong, but faith is stronger. And God, the God of justice, is eager to turn the latch.

Pray with me: *Holy One, make us persistent in our petition and audacious in our action. Ground our words and our deeds in your justice. Amen.*