

By Therese Sherlock, CSJ

Open a bible at the center of your group. Have votive candles for each group member. Share with one another a saint to whom you pray, when and why. Light a candle for each saint and place them near the open bible. Then pray Psalm 121 together.

LEADER: I lift up my eyes to the mountains.

ALL: From where will my help come?

LEADER: My help comes from the Holy One—

ALL: The maker of heaven and earth.

LEADER: The Holy One is our guardian.

ALL: Our guardian never slumbers nor sleeps.

LEADER: The Holy One guards our lives—

ALL: Our comings and goings now and forever. Amen.

For 24 years Antonieta Zuniga drove a city bus in Los Angeles. She worked five days and rested two. Now retired and a widow, Antonieta rests five days and works two. She works weekends driving families to visit relatives in prisons five to ten hours away, leaving from 1:00 to 3:00 AM to arrive for 8:00 AM visiting hours.

“A lot of people depend on me,” she says. “It’s a good feeling.”

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

For many years Antonieta has visited her son in prison once a month. He is serving a 35-year to life sentence for second degree robbery. “He was president of his class in high school,” she says. “But he got into the nightmare of drugs and the three strikes law gave him the long sentence. I’m hoping for a miracle.”

Now her son is doing what Antonieta calls “good time.” He has earned a two-year AA college degree and is working on a BA. “He had to ask to study,” she explains. “It’s not part of prison unless you ask.”

Antonieta found herself alone after her husband died. She converted the family van for camping into California’s only shuttle service to prisons. She already had a commercial driver’s license. Her business card reads: “We

are new transportation services for families and friends of individuals that are incarcerated in the California State and Federal Prisons.”

“People were always calling me, asking for rides, needing help filling out forms for background checks. Visitors don’t know they need money for vending machines in order to eat and accounts for those inside to call out. I gave out my phone number. Inmates spread it inside. Families call when they want to go.

“Lots of people run shuttles to Vegas, but I’m going to prisons,” Antonieta says. “I transport the best people in the world. Who else has passengers screened by the FBI?” She makes trips every weekend to one of ten prisons. “I make the trip even if only one person goes, and I lose money. I have been paid in spaghetti and kitchen cleaning. It’s a matter of service, not money.”

● What widows do you know who find creative ways to serve others?



Antonieta drove eight children to all Camp Suzanne events for the five days the children visited their moms in prison.

GOSPEL

A widow persists in pursuing justice.

NARRATOR: Jesus told his disciples a parable with a point—to pray always and not lose heart.

JESUS: There was a judge in a certain city who neither feared God nor respected human beings. A widow in that same city kept coming to him and saying:

WIDOW: Take up my case. Give me my just rights against my opponent.

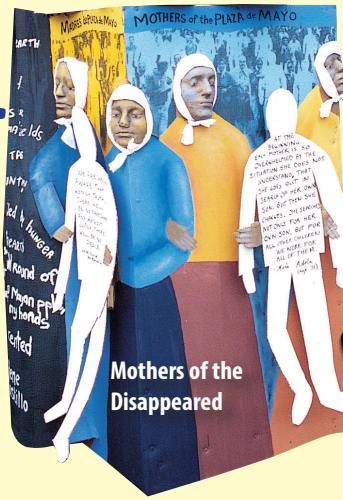
JESUS: For a while the judge refused, but finally he said to himself—

JUDGE: I neither fear God nor respect people, but this widow—she is wearing me out. I will settle

her case justly lest in the end she disgrace me.

NARRATOR: Notice what this unjust judge says. Will God not do justice to those chosen ones who call out day and night? Will God delay justice for them? I tell you, God will give them swift justice. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on the earth?

Luke 18.1-8



to us. This is not how Jesus presents God in his other parables. So why here?

And what about the widow? We all know widows and how hard their lives can be. One of the first actions of the early Church after Pentecost was to provide for widows and their children (Acts 6). But the widow in this parable is not asking for food and basic necessities. She is seeking her “just rights.” The word in Greek, *ekdikeo*, is not the usual term for justice but a word that means *settling with an adversary* or even *seeking vengeance*. The judge is arbitrating in a lawsuit. We have a widow with the means and the moxie to take someone to court. How does seeing her like this affect how we hear Jesus’ parable?

The judge neither fears God nor respects human beings, which makes him an unworthy person in Jewish eyes. When he finally acts, it is because he is afraid the widow will disgrace him. The Greek word here means to give him a black eye. This vivid image may mean the widow will make him look too corrupt in others’ eyes or it may mean literally she can beat him up. At any rate, the judge only gives in because her actions threaten him. Does this sound like God?

● Why do you think Jesus tells a story like this?

● How do Luke’s framing sentences affect how we see the characters?

● Who, if anyone, is like God in the parable?

What example does the widow give us?

Jesus’ parables involve ordinary people and ordinary situations—a widow pleading for justice, a father longing for a wayward son, a farmer sowing seed, a manager cheating the boss. Antonieta is a living parable, a widow turning prison visits to her son into service of a wider family of many others. Parables use ordinary people to invite us as hearers beyond the ordinary and awaken us to holy mystery, to God ever near in our lives.

Many widows found a home in Christian communities as Luke reports in Acts 6.1 and 9.36-41. Perhaps it is Christian widows like these who preserve the parable at the heart of Sunday’s gospel.

Only Luke tells it. However, he also confuses its meaning by framing the parable with a message about how to pray.

As the parable begins, Luke tells us its point—pray always and don’t lose heart. Then follows the four-verse parable about widow seeking her rights and an indifferent judge. In the last three verses Luke reinforces his message about praying and believing our prayer will be heard.

Reading the story with Luke’s frame around it makes it hard to see the unjust judge as anyone else but God. His character implies that God will hear us only if we pray persistently, that God has to be persuaded to listen

Many of us want to rescue the widow. We imagine her as weak, poor, nonviolent, and in need of protection herself. The parable takes this stereotype apart. Instead of giving us a widow in need, Jesus gives us a widow of voice and action. She wants a ruling against her adversary. She won't be silenced. She gets what she wants by persistence and social pressure.

If we read this parable with Jesus' vision, we see through the eyes of people who have very little access to power and status. The Syrophenician woman with the sick daughter, the ten lepers, demoniacs—they appeal to Jesus for healing and inclusion. But no one demands a settlement as the widow does. We trivialize her appeal by hearing it as nagging. She may not have power, but she does have voice. She persists in using her voice to seek justice.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina gathered to bear witness to the "disappeared" whom the military dictatorship in power had kidnapped and killed. Fourteen of these mothers gathered in April 1977. By Mothers' Day in October there were 237. Their number increased as the number of the disappeared grew. These witnessed every Thursday in the main plaza in Buenos Aires until 1983 when the regime collapsed.

Candy Lightener formed Mothers Against Drunk Driving,

MADD, after a drunk driver with a previous incident hit and killed her 13-year-old daughter. She turned anger and grief into active work to end drunk driving. Today MADD has chapters in every state and claims a 50% reduction in deaths since its 1980 founding.

A segregationist murdered Myrlie Evers's husband Medgar to stop his civil rights work in 1963. She never stopped hers. She persisted. Widowed with three small children, Myrlie Evers became the first woman to lead the NAACP.



As a lawyer, Ruth Bader Ginsberg won equal pay for equal work for women and equal benefits for widowers and widows raising children. As a Supreme Court judge, Justice Ginsberg inspired young women to persist in the work of equity.

- How is the widow a model for the Christian?
- What evils does the judge represent that Christians must resist?
- Who do you know who protests as the widow does?



When we read Luke's framing message and Jesus' parable together, the gospel challenges us both to pray and act. Luke reminds us to pray as if all depended on God. Jesus' parable shows how to act as if it all depended on us. And although the widow pursues her case alone in the gospel, we can imagine that she belongs to a group like the Mothers, MADD, or the NAACP.

Our challenge is to be single-hearted for God's kingdom, for the peace and justice that are possible. When it feels as if God is not standing with us, we still need to keep our commitments. Perhaps our reward is a deepening sense that our journey is valuable for the whole community.

- Whose persistence do you admire?



DO SOMETHING



- Read the children's books *She Persisted* and *She Persisted Around the World* by Chelsea Clinton for stories of women who sought justice and changed the world in our time.
- Also, read *The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation*.

Amalek sins against the vulnerable.

The Hebrew people did not have an easy time as they fled Egypt for Sinai. The book of Exodus recounts their trials and hardships, and God's ever-faithful presence. Sunday's first reading comes from a passage in the narrative after the Egyptian army has been destroyed and after the people have faced three crises in the desert: bitter waters, hunger, and extreme thirst.

Each time God intervenes. God shows the people a piece of wood to throw in the bitter water; the water becomes sweet. To satisfy their hunger, God sends quail and manna. To quench their thirst, water springs from a rock.

Sunday's first reading culminates this triptych of God's life-giving wonders with the powerful image of Moses raising his arms in prayer and praise as the Hebrew people face another crisis—a battle with the vicious Amalekites, who attack the most vulnerable among the faint and weary Hebrews. How can a small wandering band of former slaves hope to defeat the professional armies of Amalek?

Moses prays for God's guidance and help in what could have been a terrible defeat. As long as he is able to hold his arms outstretched in prayer, the battle goes their way. The traditional Jewish prayer form is to pray with arms outstretched, opening oneself to God.

When Moses grows weary, Aaron and Hur come to his aid and hold up his arms. Nothing, the narrative tells us, is impossible for God if we persist in our relationship with God. But being human, we cannot

do it alone. In community we find the strength to keep praying. By holding one another up, our journey to God will be assured.

Who defeats Amalek?

Amalek came and waged war against Israel. Moses said to Joshua, "Pick out certain men, and tomorrow go out and engage Amalek in battle. I will be standing on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand."

So Joshua did as Moses told him: he engaged Amalek in battle after Moses had climbed to the top of the hill with Aaron and Hur. As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, Israel had the better of the fight, but when he let his hands rest, Amalek had the better of the fight.

Moses' hands, however, grew tired; so they put a rock in place for him to sit on. Meanwhile Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other, so that his hands remained steady until sunset. And Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

Exodus 17.8-13

● **Who holds you up in prayer regularly?**

● **Who do you hold up in prayer regularly?**

PRAY

Spend a brief time in silence to surface concerns you have for people's basic human needs and rights. Make a silent commitment as an individual or a group commitment to persist in helping someone seek justice. Then pray together the following verses from Sirach 17.6-7,10,14-15.

LEADER: God gives us tongues and eyes, ears and minds for thinking.

ALL: God fills us with knowledge and understanding. God shows us good and evil.

LEADER: God gives us commandments concerning our neighbors.

ALL: Let us praise God's name, and proclaim the grandeur of God's works.

LEADER: Let us remember that our ways are always before God;
ALL: We cannot hide from God's eyes. Amen.

Therese Sherlock, CSJ, is managing editor of Good Ground Press.

Get your copy of *Holy Women of Luke's Gospel* to learn more about the widow in today's Gospel and other women in Jesus' life. Only \$8.00. Order at goodgroundpress.com or call 800-232-5533.

