

Pentecost 24C
Peace, Seattle
October 3, 2016
Luke 18:1-8

TENACIOUS PRAYER

In a remote area of Chili's Atacama Desert, inside a rocky, lifeless mountain, a disaster begins to unfold when a century-old mine collapses, trapping 33 miners 2,300 feet below the surface.¹

Though none of them is seriously hurt, they quickly discover that the emergency radio is useless, the medical kit is empty, and their supplies of food and water are meager.

News of the collapse spreads quickly and family members gather at the gates to the mine, hoping against hope that their loved ones have survived and that rescue is possible. But as the hours turn into days, it becomes clear that the mining company has no intention of attempting a rescue.

This true story, captured powerfully in the 2015 film THE 33² follows two dramas as they unfold:

- THE ONE 200 stories beneath the surface, where the miners fight back fears and learn to share their fate as brothers.
- THE OTHER at the chain link fence above, where family members set up a camp they call 'ESPERANZA' – HOPE.

Keeping constant vigil at the fence with others, María Segovia, sister of a trapped miner, rails against the mine company's inaction. And when news media pick up the story and a government envoy arrives, she demands action on behalf of the 33.

Her voice—loud, brash, unrelenting—helps the others find there's. And slowly, the wheels of rescue begin to turn.

María and the widow of today's parable are cut from the same cloth.

Vulnerable in every way—socially, financially, physically—the widow has little ground to stand on. Approaching the corrupt judge with no one by her side and nothing in her purse to grease his palm, she pounds on his door again and again demanding to be heard.

Contrast her with the judge—a power broker in a male-driven world who could care less what others think—and you get the picture: **She doesn't have a snowball's chance of getting his attention, much less getting a decision in her favor!**

But, as the stories of Jesus attest, things go topsy-turvy in the world of God's reign.

The rotten judge, worn down by the woman's persistence, finally sticks his head out the window and shouts, ENOUGH ALREADY! I'LL GET YOU WHATEVER YOU WANT IF YOU JUST SHUT UP!
And justice, at last, is done.

Jesus must have gotten a lot of laughs with this parable...and a lot of sighs, too.

¹ See Héctor Tobar's *Sixty-Nine Days*, which tells the story of the Chilean miners. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/07/07/sixty-nine-days>

² <http://www.the33movie.com/> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOoIBOYqHyw>

Is this what prayer is like? At times it can certainly feel that way.

- Pounding on heaven's door.
- Hoping against hope that somehow, some way, the hurt will heal, the pain will cease, the crisis will be averted, the world will be made whole.

I recently received a call from a woman who got my number from the internet.

She shared the litany of suffering she'd endured over the past 32 years—the accidents, surgeries, losses, and heartache, and the impact it's had on her.

She's had no community to lean on as she's negotiated this wilderness. Could God, she wondered, be trusted to make her whole again?

What hope does Jesus offer us in this parable?

He insists that God is nothing like the unjust judge; that God will grant us relief; that our prayers are more than a collection of unanswered pleas; they are our participation in the coming reign of God.

By praying continually and not giving up hope, we live into the conviction that God has not abandoned this world. With hope in hand, we work, however we can, for the justice and peace that is coming.³

Today we have the opportunity to practice such a hope; to join the widow, to stand with Maria at the gates; to make our own voices heard as participants in the Offering of Letters campaign.

Today we exercise both our faith and our citizenship by writing letters to congress in support of Bread for the World's SURVIVE AND THRIVE campaign.

Ending hunger means more than just providing enough food and calories for everyone.

Side by side with the need for sufficient food is the need for the right kinds of foods—the crucial mix that promotes the health, growth, and strength of bodies and minds—especially the more vulnerable ones: newborns, young children, and the mothers who nurture them.⁴

Is this mixing politics and religion? You could say that, I suppose. But I'd rather frame what we're doing today in terms of what we've been hearing from our readings over the past month.

Throughout the fall we've heard in the voices of the prophets God's advocacy on behalf of the poor and vulnerable, and God's dismay over the powerful who either neglect them or do them harm.

In the parables of Jesus we've heard God's call to care for those who are different from us, to open our eyes to those who otherwise would remain invisible, to show compassion even when that means venturing outside our comfort zones, and today—to be persistent pray-ers, never giving up.

The story of the 33 miners in the Chilean desert has a joyful ending.

After 69 days, working night and day, an international team drills a rescue shaft that finally breaks through to the trapped men, and one by one they ascend to the surface and are reunited with their families.

³ Suggested by Kimberly Bracken Long, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p.190.

⁴ Follow this link to the Offering of Letters website from which this explanation of the campaign is taken: <http://www.offeringofletters.org/>

Not all prayers are answered like that. But as people who follow a crucified and risen Lord, we are called to trust that even when all seems lost, God still has surprises in store.

History teaches us that it takes extraordinary commitment to effect change. And that one action, combined with others, can finally break the impasse, shift the agenda, turn the tide.

Like the widow of the story and like María Segovia, God calls us to stand up, to go public, to persist with our voices in order to induce change.

So today we pray and we write. And we come to the Table once more, so that our faith and hope in God's promised reign can be fed.

Amen.