

“The power of persistent prayer”
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Most of us know the name Rosa Parks. And we think we know her story.

It’s an inspiring account: a little, old lady gets on a Montgomery bus and sits down, tired from a hard day. When she’s told to give up her seat to a white man, she does something unheard of: she refuses. And it’s that spontaneous and gutsy decision that launches a movement for racial equality and forever establishes her name in the annals of our nation’s heroes.

There’s just one problem. This isn’t the entire story. And what’s been left out—and a lot’s been left out—is essential to understanding how real change occurs.

All of us here want to make a difference in the world, changing not only individuals but our very culture. But we feel mighty small in the face of the evil that spreads its tentacles into our communities, smearing our politics with big money and misogyny, birthing one out of every 5 children into poverty, granting corporations the rights of citizens, quadrupling the use of heroin, imprisoning and executing brothers just because they’re black, stripping the earth of mountains and trees, and forcing 12-year-olds to work 20 hours a day so that we can pay a little less for T-shirts.

Not to worry, says the media, we have a solution. Behold the hero. Or, if things are really bad, the superhero. These brave and powerful individuals—so different from the rest of us—will save the day.

This mythology of social change, says writer, musician, and activist David LaMotte, is everywhere. It’s in our movies, our TV shows, our classrooms, even our presidential election. We are taught that heroic speeches and dramatic action are at the root of change. And we want to believe this mythology, because we want someone to rescue us.

The problem for the widow in Jesus’ parable is that no one’s coming to her rescue. She has no family to assist her, no friends in high places to pull strings for her. She’s on her own.

Throughout Scripture, we hear concern for the widow, as one of the most vulnerable categories of people in ancient times. Men hold all the cards in her society. Her power, her protection, was completely dependent on her husband, and now he’s gone. Her lawsuit, pastor Jeff Krehbiel surmises, is probably to retain rights to her husband’s estate: “It was not uncommon for unscrupulous executors to leave the widow with nothing. It is not an exaggeration to say that this case may well have been an issue of life and death for her.”

The judge, however, doesn't care. He's part of a system greased by bribery and rigged to dismiss lawsuits like hers and rule in favor of her opponent. It's a system full of people who believe their money and political influence place them above accountability to the law.

It's enough to make anyone lose heart, and Jesus knows this. He knows that—even while his disciples pray the words he taught, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”—this earth will not soon give up its corruption and unfaithfulness. And so Jesus continues the lesson. He shows the disciples what “Thy kingdom come” really means.

In Jesus' story, the widow turns to that refuge of the powerless: persistent protest. She pesters the judge. When he sits down to eat, she's there knocking at the door. When he's holding court at the gates, she's there shouting and demanding that “Widow Lives Matter.” When he's walking through the market, she's there pulling at his expensive clothes with her rags. Our translation says that she's bothering the judge, wearing him out. But the Greek is far more forceful: it literally translates as “beating him black and blue.” She is on him, day and night, not only annoying him, but doing so publicly—drawing public attention (and shame) to the injustice she has suffered at his hands.

I imagine other widows, also wronged by this judge, stepping forward and joining her cause. I see Anna, the widow who proclaimed the good news of Jesus' birth. I see the widow who gave her last coins. Together, they are not weak; they are prophets, and God bellows through them.

When the judge at last relents and grants the widow justice, he doesn't do so, Jesus says, because he's had a change of heart. This isn't the movies. No, he does it because he wants to be left alone.

Frederick Douglas once said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

The widow in our parable achieves justice in the same way every church, every community organization, has ever achieved justice: by persistently showing up, working together, and speaking a vision.

This persistent protest, Jesus says, is how we pray.

Prayer is more than the private words we offer God. Prayer is a disruptive force—something so powerful that it can equip a widow to overcome a judge.

When Jesus tells this parable, he's been talking for a long time now about power—the power to change the world. He has just told the disciples that if they had even faith the size of a mustard seed, they could command a tree to uproot and plant itself in the sea, and it would obey. After

this story, a blind man sitting on the roadside, begging, will cry out to Jesus for mercy. And when people try to silence him, he persists, just like the widow, shouting all the more loudly.

Prayer, as re-conceived by Christ, is marching on Washington; it's cooking church dinners and listening to the weary and wounded; it's dogging the steps of those who have power and who refuse to share it until it costs them more to fight than to give in.

“The revolution,” writes Charles Marsh, author of *The Beloved Community*, “begins in the pews, as the movement of the sixties learned, and in a whole lot of waiting around for car rides, in tedious organizational meetings and arguments about strategy, around the mimeograph machine. The hardest part is not envisioning the end but living in the sluggish between.”

That's the true story of Rosa Parks—not a “little, old lady,” but a 42-year-old, trained activist whose actions that day in 1955 were, in the words of David LaMotte, “rooted in years of undramatic daily work for change.” Prior to her arrest, Parks was trained in civil, nonviolent disobedience at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. She was not the first to refuse to give up her seat. And her arrest only made headlines because the Montgomery Women's Political Council (which had been addressing busing for years) arranged a boycott and stayed up the whole night making thousands of flyers. The group of clergy who met the next day weren't the ones who changed segregation laws in this country; it was a whole lot of women, most of whose names we don't even know, hand delivering pamphlets all night long who set us on the path toward desegregation.

We've got to tell the story right, because if we don't, we'll keep on waiting for a hero. We'll keep on thinking that widows and regular people like us can't make a difference. We'll keep on wanting to be the person who makes the big “prophetic” speeches, never realizing that the greatest heroism comes without renown.

Did you know that Martin Luther King Jr. almost gave up? He was working in Montgomery, a year after Rosa Parks' refusal to move. He actually resigned. Violent arrests were up, the KKK was on the move, and people were afraid. Nothing seemed to be changing. King himself had been arrested and had feared for his life. And then King gets a call. It's midnight. The caller threatens his life and the life of his family. He's been getting phone calls like this one for weeks now, sometimes 30 to 40 in a single day. He falls into a chair at the kitchen table and lays his head down on its hard surface. He thinks of his wife and baby sleeping upstairs. He grips his head and prays, “Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right... But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage... I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.” And it was then, in the small, silent kitchen, King heard these words: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.”

Friends, it wasn't a speech before millions that turned the course of human history. It was a midnight prayer at a kitchen table. It was thousands of people unknown to us working in church basements for change. Hundreds of thousands of people praying together, praying persistently, praying with their meetings and their letters to the editor, praying until the powers of this world were black and blue.

We don't need heroes. The only hero that ever mattered was the one who promised that the same Spirit of power in him would also be in us, and who told us, in great mystery, that we would do even greater things than he. What we need are disciples, fishermen and widows and regular people willing to organize.

“Want to change the world?” writes David LaMotte. “Make some copies.” **Amen.**