

Sermon: Luke 18:1-8 (Proper 24C and 144th Parish Anniversary)  
Christ Church Riverdale, 17 October 2010; The Rev. Robert C. Lamborn, Rector

Luke 18:1-8 (The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge) Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." ' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

Today we are celebrating the 144th anniversary of Christ Church Riverdale's consecration in October 1866. And in so doing, we are giving particular thanks for six of our sisters and brothers who have lived through two-thirds of those 144 years. Lauretta DeHaney, Amay Fraser, Farny Fowle, Vin & Etta Mesiano, and Illy Valyi all turned, or will turn 95 this year. When they were born in 1915 our parish was 49 years old, and a lot has changed since then: There was no Henry Hudson Parkway; we had a different altar and baptismal font; we didn't yet have the parish hall or the pipe organ. We didn't even have air conditioning! (Oh, that's right; we *still* don't have air conditioning. OK, there's still something to accomplish in the next 95 years!)

1915 was during a challenging period in the life of Christ Church. World War I was underway in Europe and it was only a matter of time before the United States got involved. For years the parish had been struggling financially, as its wealthiest members died off. "By 1916 [the 50th parish anniversary] attendance at the Sunday services had fallen off to such an alarming extent that the entire economy of the church was seriously threatened."<sup>1</sup> Yet the birth in 1915 of Lauretta, Amay, Farny, Vin & Etta, and Illy meant that help was on the way! Actually, things got better before any of them arrived here, as a lot of people came together to help. Finances improved with the end of World War I. The Great Depression took another toll, and we've had other ups and downs since then.

Put yourself for a moment in the shoes of the widow Jesus tells about who keeps pestering the judge until he grants her justice. As a widow you're one of the most vulnerable members of society because it was organized around men taking care of everything--doing the business, inheriting the property, etc. The reason you'd have to pester the judge yourself would be not only that you've lost your husband, but that there are no other adult males in the family to stand up for you and take care of you. Maybe that's *why* you need justice against your opponent--somebody may have taken advantage of how vulnerable you are.

As the widow in Jesus' story, you've got nothing, but knowing that, you've got nothing to lose, either. You've lived long enough to learn patience and to hone that patience into a tenacity that has seen you through other ordeals and will see you through this one. You're tougher than

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<sup>1</sup> *Christ Church, Riverdale: A History: 1866-1941* (New York: Rector, Wardens and Vestry of Christ Church, Riverdale-on-Hudson, [1941]), 22.

this poor excuse for a judge, and you don't care about embarrassing yourself, as long as you embarrass the judge into doing the right thing! Now in telling this parable, Jesus is doing something common in his day--arguing from the lesser to the greater. So if this jerk of a judge finally gives justice to get the widow off his back, *how much more* will the God of love grant justice to the chosen ones who cry out in prayer? Our 95-year-olds are shining examples of the wisdom and patience and tenacity of the widow in Jesus' parable. Without their participation, our altar guild, Bible study, choir, hospitality, and many other areas of our life would not be the same. Christ Church Riverdale would not be the same without their generous stewardship, helping our ups be higher and longer and our downs be shorter and not as low as they would've been otherwise.

Jesus tells the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow so that his followers will know to pray always and not lose heart. But who among us has not prayed for something--recovery from an illness, release from addiction, reconciliation of a relationship--who among us has not prayed for something that we haven't seen realized? Our 95-year-olds have lived long enough to see many of their prayers answered and some of their prayers not answered as they'd hoped. And yet they have persisted; and yet they have been good stewards of their bodies, their time, their resources--stewards of their lives! One very powerful example of that persistence is Laretta DeHaney, who attended Christ Church for the first time many decades ago. I'm grieved to say at that time she didn't feel fully welcome as an African American. But I'm privileged to say that she didn't give up on us. She came back in the 1980s; she gave us another try and found the parish to be diverse and welcoming, and so has gifted us with her presence and ministry ever since then. Thank you, Laretta, and thank you Farny, Amay, Vin, Etta, and Illy for showing wisdom, patience, and tenacity in your own ways!

As a society we tend to like round numbers: we celebrate centennials, sesquicentennials and bicentennials; we organize our thinking around decades of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Although some items sold by the dozen are also packaged into a gross of twelve dozen--144--by the standards of centennials and decades, a 44th anniversary isn't all that significant. The number 144 does appear in the Book of Revelation, however. In the Bible, the number represents completeness--12 tribes of Israel, 12 disciples of Jesus, for example. And in the Bible one way to intensify something is to say it more than once: Jesus says, "Truly, truly I say to you." We sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy." So 12 times 12 represents not just completeness but divine perfection!

The Book of Revelation was written after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70, but Revelation contains a vision of a new Jerusalem. The walls of this new Jerusalem are 144 cubits high and each is 12,000 stadia long, meaning that the area of the city is 144 million square stadia. 12,000 people from each of the 12 tribes of Israel sing praise to God. 144 gives us a vision of divine perfection, but this perfection is anything but static. Yes there are walls 144 cubits high, but the walls have gates *and the gates are never closed*. Not only do 144,000 from the tribes of Israel praise God, but so do a multitude from every tribe and people and nation! 144 years ago, people of vision and commitment came together to found Christ Church Riverdale as a place to praise God, a place to pray together and not lose heart. May God grant us fullness of years, but even more fullness of lives to be stewards in the service of God and each other with vision and commitment so that God's completeness, open and dynamic--God's perfection of love may continue to grow in our midst and beyond our walls!

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