

Sermon

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The Persistent Widow

May the words spoken, and the words received be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

In the beginning, Mystery looked out at the vast expanse of the void, and created all that is—darkness and light, land and sea, inanimate things and creatures. Mystery saw all that had been created, and called it good, very good. In fact, Mystery gave humanity awareness of itself as being created in Mystery's own likeness and image. "Imago dei," the image of God. Mystery gave humanity an understanding that God's essence was love, pure love, and asked only that humanity would remember their identity as "imago dei," "image of love."

Mystery also gave humanity the freedom to do what it chose with its awareness, rooting for Love itself to be their constant choice. But humanity got distracted by loving shining baubles and power more than Love. They forgot and forsook the Creator.

Nevertheless, Mystery persisted.

Love never gave up on humanity.

A small band of humanity had such deep respect for Mystery that they didn't feel it proper to call God by the name God. They invented a four-letter word—Yod He(ay) Vav He(ay)—YHWH—as a substitute. We pronounce the name as Yahweh. Yahweh made a covenant with the people: you will be mine and I will be yours. You have been created in my image of Love. I brought you out of captivity in Egypt because your oppression was a stab in my own heart.

The people rejoiced on the other side of the dry path Yahweh created through the sea. Miriam led the people in dance and song. But when the people didn't get to the promised land right away and the wilderness closed in on them, their faith also wandered during those forty years. They forgot and forsook their liberating god with grumbling and a golden calf.

Nevertheless, Yahweh persisted.

Love never gave up on humanity.

Yahweh spelled out again what it meant to be in covenant. In ten ways, on tablets of clay, Yahweh said, "Here is what it is like to honor me and to love as I love. This is what community looks like." The people celebrated this special relationship with Yahweh. First they built a beautiful box they called the Ark of the Covenant, and eventually they built a temple to house the Ark and the tablets that told them what love looked in relationship. But power was too enticing, divisions too easily made. Greed became hard to resist. Orphans were abandoned and widows were left to fend on their own in a society that left them with few options. Even though the people knew that justice was the hallmark of right relationships, those in power were unconcerned with the consequences of injustice—to those within and those without. They were so enamored of their own interests that they didn't see how this left them vulnerable to outside intruders. Again and again they were brought low when they forgot and forsook their justice-seeking god, forced to learn that Yahweh's covenant with them would not abide such hubris.

Nevertheless, Yahweh persisted.

Love never gave up on humanity.

For the people, divisions became so severe that they created two lands, two centers of religion and politics. Both continued with this give-and-take of Yahweh's covenant. God gave,

the people took. God gave instruction to live faithfully; the people in power took what they wanted from those on the underside of life, those most vulnerable to their abuse. It cost the people first one kingdom and then another.

A great empire took advantage of the people's weakness, and handed them a resounding defeat. Their city was sacked, their temple desecrated and smashed to bits. The poorest of the poor were left on the land to scrounge for themselves; the skilled, wealthy and powerful were taken to the foreign land and forced to serve the emperor. They had forgotten and forsook Yahweh, and they feared that Yahweh had done the same to them.

Nevertheless, Yahweh persisted.

Love never gave up on humanity.

It must have seemed a good plan to God originally to write the commandments for Love on tablets of clay. Tablets made from the substance of earth, just as humanity had been. But it wasn't enough—clay was too fragile and it was too bound to one place and time. It was too easy for Yahweh's people to forget and forsake this relationship of love that produced justice. And in their forgetting, the people felt alone.

Nevertheless, Yahweh persisted.

Love never gave up on humanity.

Love said, "I must do something different for these that I love. I will write my law on their hearts. They will never forget; they will never feel that I've abandoned them. They will no longer need clay tablets or even temples to know that I am their God and they are my people."

But God was too optimistic. Or maybe God knew that writing this covenant on their hearts was just what the people needed in their day and time—a way to have hope in a time of hopelessness. But it didn't keep greed from being more alluring than communal well-being or power more enticing than justice. For when God put on humanity's skin, Jesus encountered a people still willing to hand over the vulnerable to keep peace with the powerful. Orphans could still be abandoned and widows left to fend for themselves. He found people cast to the margins who needed a word of acceptance, a hand of mercy, and a measure of justice.

Nevertheless, Jesus persisted.

Love never gave up on humanity.

Love, to those who followed Jesus, didn't dine at the palace, but broke bread with those in need. He encouraged them never to give up hope. "Continue to pray, always," Jesus told them. "If even an unjust judge, with enough pestering, will finally grant a widow protection from the one who is seeking her harm, imagine how much more God, who is just, will seek after your well-being without your having to grovel. Pray and pray again, not because God needs to hear you beg, but because you need to know how much God wants to hear from you, how much God desires that you *know* you are God's and God is yours. For when you know—truly know—with a heart upon which Love has written, it is easier for you to live that covenant faithfully with one another."

For many generations, Jesus-followers were persecuted for the covenant that was written upon their hearts. Jesus had summed up the law this way: love God completely, and love your neighbors as you love yourself. The language of the Jesus followers about a kingdom of God's making, to which they gave their allegiance over the kingdoms of humanity's making, made them targets of the ruling class. Until, that is, Emperor Constantine believed that he saw a sign of the Jesus-followers in the clouds, with the word "conquer" instructing him to defeat his enemies. Then, Jesus-following became something called Christendom, something altogether different. Then, those in power could justify might and greed in the name of Jesus himself. Orphans could

be abandoned and widows left to fend for themselves in Jesus' name. Economic and institutional systems that benefit the powerful and wealthy at the expense of the vulnerable could be created in Jesus' name. People could be cast to the margins in Jesus' name.

Nevertheless, Jesus persist.

Love never gives up on humanity.

May we be the people who persist in the way of Love, as we know it through the way of Jesus. May we persist in loving Mystery who made us in Love's own image. May we be persistent in loving ourselves, one another, and the rest of creation with a just and compassionate love. And may these loves be as near as the beating of our own hearts, where the covenant itself is written. Amen.