

Assist & Persist
19th Sunday after Pentecost + Domestic Violence Awareness
October 20, 2019
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel

[Luke 18:1-7](#) (ERV)

[Philippians 1:27-2:4](#) (NLT)

Let me tell you a story. There is a woman named Sampat Pal Devi, who grew up in one of the poorest provinces of India. Schooling wasn't available for girls in her village, but she learned to read on her own by stealing her brother's textbooks. At the age of 12, she was forcibly married to an ice cream vendor. One night, a few years later, she learned that her close friend's husband had abused her nearly to the point of death, and Sampat marched up to him and demanded he stop. He laughed at Sampat, told her that it was none of her business, and that as a woman she had no power over him. The next day, Sampat gathered up many local women who had heard the stories of the abuse, and wielding bamboo sticks, they showed up again at the friend's husband's home. Once again, he laughed, and the women proceeded to beat him with their bamboo sticks, promising that if he abused his wife again, they'd be back. Over the next few months, Sampat Pal Devi walked from town to town, encouraging women in each place to form local organizations, where they could together face down those who had been abusing them. To help identify members of this movement, they started wearing bright pink *sari*, and just the sight of these brightly-garbed women showing up at a home reduced the incidence of intimate partner violence.

Yet, Sampat knew that if they were only about vengeance, only about making men be afraid, that they wouldn't last long. So, she became the first woman in her village to get a sewing machine, and taught classes on how to use it to sew – so that women could support themselves and their families without being married as children. She also taught self-defense courses, reading courses, and setup a school specifically for girls so that no one else would have to be self-taught. In 2008, when

the electrical co-op started turning off the power unless they were paid an extortionate bribe, Sampat led her “pink gang” to show up and protest, nonviolently, but with their bamboo sticks carried at the ready. They were able to oust the corrupt co-op leaders from their position, and the power was returned, paid for with profit rather than bribes. When a local politician thought he could get away with abusing woman after woman, the Gulabi Gang (as it had become known, after the Hindi/Kannada word for “Pink”) showed up outside the government facility, day after day, until the politician resigned and was arrested.¹

The movement that Sampat Pal Devi started changed over time, but stuck true to the ideals of supporting women’s independence and safety in rural India. Today, the Gulabi Gang receives support from men and women and offers assistance in several provinces, only resorting to violence after pursuing conversation, alerting the police, and mediation – but still teaches self-defense to the women of the area, just in case.

Sampat’s work is so close to a story from the Gospel of Luke, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. In this parable, a poor widow seeks a ruling from a judge, but the judge will not acknowledge her in any way. She follows him, seeking him out at every opportunity, until he finally gives in, out of worry that she’ll give him a black eye! Yes, that’s actually what the text says – though, it’s not entirely clear if he’s concerned about a physical or a social black eye. In any case, this parable is framed as a way of thinking about prayer – to be persistent in our prayers, because, just as the judge answered the widow’s demand eventually, God hears us and will answer us all the more rapidly.

This parable – like most parables, I think – is meant to be provocative, engaging, and thought-provoking. The text tells us that the widow is not seeking justice – but vengeance. She’s threatening a judge with violence, and gets her way. A few months ago, a few of us explored this parable through picturing ourselves as

¹ For more about Sampat Pal Devi and the Gulabi Gang, <https://www.beaninspirer.com/sampat-pal-devi-founder-gulabi-gang-establish-equal-rights-woman/> ; <http://panos.org.uk/features/sari-gang-fights-injustice/> ; <https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/interview-of-sampat-pal-devi-of-gulabi-gang/article6407644.ece>

various people in the story – as the widow, as the judge – and also thinking of it in different ways. What if, rather than the judge representing God, as so often is described, what if the Widow represented God? God is persistent with us, present anywhere we go, patient, but active in trying to get us to acknowledge that we’ve made mistakes, and hurt others. Or, what if you are neither the widow nor the judge, but a bystander, witnessing the whole thing? Do you side with either? Should you help out?

In his letter to the first European church, in the Roman colony of Philippi, Paul tries to help these new Christians understand what living a Christian life is supposed to be. “Do nothing in a spirit of selfish ambition,” he writes, “but in humility let each consider the other better than themselves. Do not be always concentrating on your own interests, but let each be equally concerned for the interests of others.”² Paul, at least, seems to suggest that the right thing to do is assist each other, not out of a sense of superiority, but out of humility. You see, in the parable of the judge and the widow, neither has assistance from anyone. The judge even thinks to himself, “I don’t care about God or people.” He’s cut off completely. And as for the widow, beyond the simple fact that she acts alone throughout the parable – even the Greek word that we translate as widow, *xasma*, means “lacking” or “one without.”³ (It’s from the same root as our word “chasm.”) What if the widow and the judge had someone in common? What if, rather than threatening violence and fearing each other, there were a mediator able to help them know that both were loved? And what if that mediator was Jesus? What if that mediator, helping the widow and the judge to be less alone, was a follower of Christ’s Way? What if... it was you?

My friends, if you take encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness and compassion⁴ from Christ, then show that in speaking up for each other. By recognizing that you are not alone – and that you can help others be connected to

² Philippians 2:3-4, selected

³ [Strong’s Greek 5503](#), ctd in “Tenacious Widow Notes” by Elana Keppel Levy (unpublished, 2019)

⁴ Philippians 2:1

their community. Just as the Widow and the Judge were isolated, so too are many people suffering from domestic abuse. Abusers often try to control the lives of those in their sphere, trying to limit their ability to seek help from anyone outside, convincing their victims that no one will listen or be interested in helping. That's where being a visible supporter is so important. One of the reasons that Sampat Pal Devi and the Gulabi Gang ended up being such a force for change was because of their ability to connect oppressed people with each other, and, by wearing the same bright-pink color, be visible in the community. Notice, too, that they started by helping others – even if you're in a situation where you don't know if there's anything you can do for yourself, it's somehow easier to focus on other people. Sampat sought and received a divorce from her husband only after many years of helping others escape their abusers – but she was able to do so with a community of support.

In the book *Healing Spiritual Wounds*, Rev. Carol Howard Merritt writes beautifully about the church's complicity in supporting abusers – and how the church is already helping to restore community and can be a life-giving, healing place. She writes,

When we suffer wounds, we can understand the nurture and comfort of God, who is the source of all life. Through this, we move from understanding salvation as an individual act of submitting to the Father to realizing that we work alongside God for the salvation of all creation. This way of thinking... made me aware of the beautiful idea that God saves us not in a solitary act of a murmured prayer but through pulsing, vibrant community.⁵

So, let us be visible as the community where God's life-giving, vibrant love connects us to each other. Let us all assist each other, teaching and learning from each other the skills of loving care and sacred peace. And through it all, may we persist by knowing that God is with us – that we are never as alone as we sometimes feel, for we are all connected to God – and through God, all the rest of God's children. Amen.

⁵ Carol Howard Merritt, *Healing Spiritual Wounds*, HarperOne, New York, NY (2017)