

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 9, 2025

Grace and peace to you from God, our creator, and the Lord Jesus Christ. If you joined us on livestream on Sunday, you would have noticed that we were having some trouble with our sound. And after some diligent work all service long, our sound team got us back up and running. But unfortunately, it missed the beginning of the service, including the scripture reading and about the first five minutes of my sermon. Many of you may not know, but I am not a manuscript preacher, meaning that I don't write all of my sermon out. I have bullet points and outlines along with words and phrases and, sometimes, quotes from authors or commentators. And I have found in the course of my ministry that that is the best way for me to experience worship and lead a congregation in worship. But that means that even sermons preached the same day on the same text are a little bit different. So in order to maintain the integrity and the movement of the spirit in our worship service on Sunday, today I'm going to open us in prayer, read our Sunday scripture, and begin the first five minutes of my sermon. When you are watching this back, there will be a jump. In fact, I'll jump from the pulpit to the floor level. We just wanted you to know to prepare yourself, but we're glad that you have gathered and are joining us once again in worship. So, friends, let us bow our heads in prayer.

Gracious and mighty God, you have called us out from the places in which we live to this place and in this time that your spirit might move in and amongst us that we might hear your words anew and be strengthened for life outside of these walls. Amen.

Our scripture today comes from the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Hear these words from the early church.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. Jesus 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 accuser." 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 Jesus said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry out day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Our text from Luke today reflects our own time very well for a story that was told nearly 2,000 years ago. Powerful people ignoring pleas for justice sounds shockingly timeless. Judges then as

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 9, 2025

now are powerful people, pillars of their community, ones that people look up to. Widows in the Israelite tradition were often really dependent upon judges for protection and fairness. They had no family. So they were isolated and very easily victimized. There was no one to argue their part, to stand in support of them. So in this story, Jesus tells us the widow's only hope for justice is this judge. and he's a bad judge. There's a phrase in verse five, "I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out." The 'wear me out' in Greek literally translates to 'hit me in the face.' "I will grant her justice so that she may not hit me in the face." Since we can assume that the widow would not have had enough power to physically accost a judge of a community, maybe we view it as metaphorical that the judge would publicly lose face. The image he presents to the community would be tarnished. The widow keeps standing before him repeating justice, justice, justice. And astonishingly, he finally caves. The text is very spare in what the time frame of this happening was. So I imagine this widow following the judge around in each and every aspect of his everyday life. She sees him at the market outside of his home, walking into the justice hall, on the way out of the justice hall. And every time she sees this judge, she says, "Grant me justice. Grant me justice. Grant me justice." This parable is one of Luke's 'how much more' parables. There are parables that make very strong points by moving from the lesser to the greater. So this parable is not as concerned with the injustice of the judge. It is a parable that is more concerned about the powerful justice of God. Jesus is almost saying to the gathered crowds like "if this jerk gets it, how much more quickly will our just and loving God grant justice?" There is another repeated phrase that comes about 'the fear of the Lord.' It is not fear of the Lord the way our modern minds think about it about being scared, but it's rather a deep respect and a deep reverence for the awesome power and might of God. Proverbs 9 itself says that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom." So the fear of the Lord in Hebrew tradition was like reverence and awe and trust in the power and might of God. Maybe less fear and more knowledge of the appropriate relationship between us as created creatures and God the creator of all. Now, the widow's deep fear of the Lord, her trust in the promises of God are what fueled this tenacious pursuit of justice in spite of an unjust judge and the unjust world around her. The first time I preached this text was nearly 15 years ago in my congregation in Kansas as part of a Children's Sabbath sermon. It was the text for the day. For those of you who may not know, Children's Sabbath is an international and ecumenical celebration that was established by the Children's Defense Fund. The Children's Defense Fund grew out of the Civil Rights Movement and was founded by Marian Wright Edelman. (I always flip the last names.) Marian Wright Edelman. She was the first African-American woman admitted to the bar in Mississippi, and out of the civil rights movement, she and others around her began the Children's Defense Fund as a way to focus on the needs of children around the world. So, in that sermon 15 years ago, I shared some really heartbreaking statistics about the reality of need in the lives of our youngest and frailest in our nation. Unfortunately, in 15 years, those statistics have just gotten worse. And

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 9, 2025

truthfully, here in Memphis, we don't need statistics. We just open our eyes and look. We look around outside, and we see the gap between the haves and the have nots simply grow and grow and grow. We watch as the widow and the orphan and the alien in our midst are tossed to the side. We see as that gap between making ends meet and making impossible choices like the difference between choosing to pay for the rent or the medicine your family needs, that the gap between making it and making those choices gets smaller and smaller and smaller. I have a friend, a close friend of mine who volunteers for overnight shifts as a translator at Vessendarios 901. Vessendarios 901 is an immigrant advocacy group here in Memphis. And in the last number of months, they have started help hotlines for Spanish-speaking and Latino communities in the face of public...the cutting of public funds and immigration forces here on our streets. When I had dinner with this friend about a week ago, she shared a story that had happened to her on her night shift that night. Keep in mind, she mans the phones when people call in with crises. And so she said around 3:00 a.m., maybe 3:30, at the end of a shift change, she received a phone call from some workers at one of our factories here in town. They called her because they didn't know what to do. On the way home from their jobs, they passed ICE agents who had pulled over other factory workers at a different factory who were leaving their jobs. And they could see this happening. So they pulled to the side of the road to see what they could do to help. And as soon as they opened their car doors, a woman who was being detained, forced into a car, she began yelling in Spanish, "Please take care of my children. Please take care of my children." And she's yelling out an address, because she was on her way home to wake the kids up for school. Their father had left about 30 minutes before that to start his shift in a factory, and there was no one who would be home, and she was terrified that her children were going to wake up and not know where any of her parents were. She had no way of getting in touch with her husband, no way of getting in touch with her children. And so she's yelling at strangers for help. They, of course, took down the address and called my friend at Vessendario and said, "What can we do or what can you do?" And she says, "It's 3:30 in the morning. I don't have anyone that I can send." So the people who called, the immigrant family that called, drove to the address this mother had yelled out to them in fear, and they sat outside until a social worker could come because they didn't want those children to be alone. That's happening all the time, every day in our city. We are nine days into November, which means that we are nine days into no SNAP benefits. 70,000 children in Shelby County schools, just alone, count as food insecure. Nearly 150,000 people in this city rely on SNAP benefits to put healthy food on the table for themselves and their loved ones. We don't really need those statistics, friends. We see the injustice of the world. We hear the cries of those calling out for justice around us.

Just last week, we reflected on Paul's encouragement to the believers in Ephesus and to us today about how to live in fraught times. That we are to live our lives as witnesses to God's hope in the

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 9, 2025

world through prayer and protest, through reflection and action in the midst of a broken world. That's what our Lukan text is telling us as well—that as we continue to hold on to hope, as the widow in this story does, when we place our trust in God, we are called to recognize that all of our actions either work toward the kingdom or they pull us further from the kingdom. All of our actions should be prayer toward God's kingdom. Persistent, unflinching, all-encompassing, living every single moment as a witness and testament to the one who created us and calls us to love one another, to pray and not lose heart with our whole lives.

When we think about the fact that Jesus calls what this persistent widow does as prayer, it's an example of praying and not losing heart. We can think about what we might be able to do as prayer that are not simply words but prayer as action. How might our hands and our feet pray? Will your hands pray as they write a letter to an elected official calling for adequate safety nets for those on the margins in our nation? Will your feet pray as they march to an end for the unlawful kidnapping and removal of immigrants off of our streets?

Will your hands pray this week as you stock emergency food pantries or hold the hand of a guest when we host them at Room in the Inn or use a hammer and a nail to help repair housing for someone who is housing insecure?

Will you pray by taking the leap and running for public office even with all of the headache and the trauma that that comes with because you feel the unflinching call to be a voice for those without voice? Will we vote with our ballots and our wallets for the institutions and the people who commit themselves to change and understand that pain and suffering of others is not an idle. it's not an idle bad thing that happens to someone else, that the pain and suffering that people are experiencing in this nation and all nations affect each and every one of us.

We don't need to wait for God to come around to the side of those who are suffering because God is already there. God has been there. Our scriptures testify to that from beginning to end that God has promised a new creation where suffering and pain and tears will no longer be, where children and adults can live life in the fullness and life in community as God created and intended us to be.

It's hard to live in troubling times. And it's hard for us when we can't promise the date or the time when justice will come to our world. When God's justice is revealed in our midst. What we can promise, what our scriptures attest to, is that we don't have to persuade God to yearn for our wholeness. We don't have to change God's mind to make God intend us to live in a world of justice. God already does. And God calls us to action.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 9, 2025

Tirelessly working toward a world shaped by God's justice is the clear call of every faithful life. It is an orientation towards justice and an attitude that we carry into every single thing we do. Persistent, unflinching, all encompassing, an attitude toward the one who created us and calls us to love one another. Friends, this day, let us consider how we will use our lives to pray without ceasing and never lose hope, because God's children are suffering. And they need our prayers. Amen.