

American academic, psychologist and author of popular science Angela Duckworth has degrees from Harvard, Oxford, and teaches psychology at the University of Pennsylvania where she is the Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Psychology. She is perhaps more recognized as the author of the book published in 2016 and was the number one best seller on the New York Times Bestsellers list for 20 consecutive weeks: *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Her book and TED Talk have had a tremendous impact on individuals and caused systemic change in institutions. In her book Professor Duckworth describes grit as something quite complex. It is, she maintains, the ability to not only persevere, to keep striving towards a person's desires and goals, it is the ability to hang in there when things get challenging, when a person experiences suffering, and it is how a person responds to set-backs. It is not just rising every time a person falls, it is getting back up wiser, and stronger for the fall.

Perhaps one of the reasons Professor Duckworth's book captured America's attention is because her research showed that things like talent and gifts are not all it takes to achieve success; grit is also needed. And while some might appear to naturally embody grit, it is something that can be learned. She even outlines some steps towards achieving or strengthening grit: set manageable goals, practice, practice, practice, once you achieve a goal, set another, practice practice, practice, and don't give up. She gives examples of how this system has helped people like Olympic athletes, National Spelling Bee Champions, and NFL teams achieve winning success.

Like all studies and popular theories, Professor Duckworth's work has its criticisms. The strongest being her methods and suggestions are only accessible to people who have economic security, that the people trapped in poverty have too much stress in their lives to be able to do what she outlines and be able to achieve that level of success. But grit is not just another form of self-help advice or a formula to get what you want. Grit is part of the larger experience of life. There are stories of individuals who despite poor economic backgrounds or toxic family environments do manage to break free from systemic poverty or the systems that would hold them back. They might not have the same goals as the people in Professor Duckworth's book, but they still are people with grit.

One example from popular culture is a woman named Brittany O'Neil. She is a woman with grit. She came from a broken family, found support from her sister and brother-in-law, dropped out of advertising school in New York, had a part time job that

didn't pay the bills, and suffered from ill health, low self-esteem, and hopelessness. After a health scare, she wanted to improve her physical health. When she realized she couldn't afford a gym membership, she decided to run for exercise. But she was so out of shape she was afraid to start. A neighbor helped her by telling her about the practice of setting small goals. She set her first goal to run one block without stopping. She did it. Then she ran two. She was invited to join a running group where she got the idea to run a marathon. Not win the marathon. Or even come in the top 25 finishers, but to run the whole thing. If her story sounds familiar, it is the plot of the 2019 movie *Brittany Runs a Marathon* written and directed by the real Brittany's former roommate. And – spoiler alert- Brittany did it. But not before many setbacks including not being able to afford the fees, lifestyle challenges, poor relationship skills, and even physical injury. In the end Brittany achieved her goal because of her ability to rise up after ever fall, not just in running, but in the other areas of her life. When she crossed the finish line, Brittany was not just physically healthier, she had learned the value of vulnerability in relationships, repenting when she had been selfish or frightened, and repairing the damage she caused. That is grit. Something Brittany learned, cultivated, and practiced and it led to something deeper than just getting what she wanted, it helped her transform into a happier, more whole person who now is better equipped for the complexity of life.

Grit may be the thing Jesus was describing in the short parable about a widow and an unjust judge in today's Gospel. Plenty of folks, including Biblical scholars and commentators, have read today's Gospel lesson and interpreted it as the author of Luke's Gospel telling those of us reading it today to keep praying no matter what because eventually those prayers will be answered. To not give up. To persevere. And that is not wrong. And if that is the message you need to hear today; I hope you hear it. But like Angela Duckworth's understanding of grit can be misinterpreted because critics look at it in the short term instead of seeing how grit can be something larger than just achieving selfish goals, I wonder if the same can happen to this little and powerful parable.

Many commentators make the assumption that the judge in this parable is a stand-in for God. But we need to be careful about that assumption. Jesus tells us not once but twice in this brief parable that the judge is someone who does not love God and does not respect people. This judge is not someone who embodies the commandments Jesus teaches are important: to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Instead the judge is someone who embodies the essence of sin: someone who has turned his back on God and his neighbors. So, I doubt this judge represents God. Perhaps the assumption was made simply because the judge is the person with the perceived power in the parable. And we need to be oh so very careful about assuming a character in a story who is in a

position of power created by our human systems is always a stand in for God. That does not reflect incarnational theology, where we remember Jesus is God Incarnate and Jesus did not hold a position of power like that. Jesus was poor, an itinerant preacher and carpenter before that. God does not necessarily always want to be represented by the rich and powerful.

Which brings us to the widow in today's parable. Widows appear quite frequently in the Old Testament. In Exodus and Deuteronomy, two books in the Bible that stress the rules for how God's people are to live, it talks about how widows and orphans are to be cared for and protected. Perhaps because they have no family system to care for and protect them. In some Old Testament stories widows like Tamar in the book Genesis, and Ruth and Naomi in the Book Ruth were heroes who not only did what they could to fight personal injustice in systems that were against them, but to make things better for all God's People.

Which means, if we are going to look for God in the parable, perhaps we find God not in the judge but in the widow. The woman who persisted in asking for justice from an unjust judge. Perhaps in the widow's persistence, Jesus wanted to remind us of the prophets that God had sent to God's People to point out when they had gone astray from God's ways and command them to change.

This interpretation can have deeper implications too. It means the justice the widow was persistently demanding was not human justice. It was God's justice. And God's justice doesn't always look like what we might want it to look like. God's justice looks like Jesus forgiving the people who crucified him. God's justice looks like Jesus rising from the dead not to kill or harm those who killed him, but to show a whole new way of being. One where we can eschew those power structures we create that keep some people down while others are protected. God's justice is justice for all people, not some. It is full of mercy. And it is what we pray for when we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer.

This can also mean when the author of Luke's Gospel opened today's lesson with the reminder to pray always and not to lose heart, they were not necessarily talking about prayer in the way we sometimes think of prayer in a culture dominated by consumerism. We often mistake prayer for that list of things we want, and we want God to do for us. It is justice the way we see it from our perspective, and when we don't get what we want, whether its that job, or grade, or car, or family trip, or whatever it is we always wanted we tend to think God doesn't care, like the unjust judge, or that we just weren't good enough to get what we want. That perception is flawed and can cause quite a lot of damage to our hearts and souls and relationships

when we pray for things like healing, or a friend who is going down a wrong path, or anytime things don't turn out the way we wanted, even though they were good things to ask for.

Of course, it is not wrong to tell God what we want, or talk to God about things that trouble us. That is part of prayer, but it isn't all that prayer is. Prayer is also listening for what God wants. God does not want us to suffer nor does God want to hurt us. What God wants is for those sinful systems we humans created that cause unjust suffering and pain and debt to end. God wants us to live the love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ in all parts of life. That is why we need to remember when we pray, it isn't for our kingdom to come, it is God's kingdom.

When we look at that little parable this way, perhaps the One who shows grit is the widow who doesn't give up, and who, if she is like widows from the Old Testament rises stronger when she falls. Like Jesus rose from the dead and shows us a deeper level of grit that is another form of God's love. God's love that doesn't give up demanding God's justice when sinful human hearts turn away. Because God loves us and God won't give up on us until we hear the call to change and will stay with us and help us transform into what God longs for us all to be.

Which is why the parable ends with Jesus' assurance of the prayer God longs to answer, that God's kingdom come, that God's justice be realized not for a few, but all people will one day be realized.

This might be a deeper challenge than we thought we might hear from the Gospel today. Such a challenge can make us wonder who are those persistent voices that keep calling us to live God's justice. At clergy day on Thursday I heard such a voice from a Jennifer Harvey, a professor at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa who works to end systemic racism in America. She asked us if we had the grit to be able to repent of the hurt we have caused not just as individuals but as a people who have historically benefited from racism and are we willing to make the sacrifices necessary to repair the damages racism has done to our lives, our economy, our church, and our country. It is a deep challenge. One that will take time to fully understand and process. One that could be applied to other systemic inequalities too, like poverty, gender inequality, and the inequalities the members of the LGBTQ community struggle with.

Her challenge reminds me of the value of not only of persistence, but of grit, embodied in the widow in Jesus' parable. That for me is an encouragement to not only persist in praying for God's justice, but to be more discerning between God's justice and my understanding of justice and practice letting go of what I want to have happen, or the world I want to create, and step back and learn more about God's kingdom. Perhaps we all can accept that challenge, not only to learn more about what God wants, but to be willing to make sacrifices in order to let God's kingdom become a bit

more real. That won't be easy. It won't happen all at once. It will take faith. It will take grit. Maybe it will help us feel encouraged to remember God loves us and God won't give up and will help us find the strength to take it day by day. Like Brittany showed us, that is how marathons are finished, how grit is learned and practiced, how faith grows, and how God's Kingdom will come.