

- Sunday worship service, March 9th, 1980, Duke Chapel. (heavenly echoey choral singing) (slow-paced echoey choral singing) (lively echoey choral singing) (slow-paced echoey choral singing) (slow-paced echoey choral singing) (soft organ worship music) (lighthearted organ music) (lighthearted organ music) (echoey choral singing) (lively organ music) (echoey choral singing)

- We welcome our many friends who are gathered this morning in the beauty of Duke Chapel on this beautiful day. In particular, we welcome to our worship service this morning the Presbyterian College Choir from Clinton, South Carolina. We are grateful for their contributions in song to this hour. We also welcome all our young friends in the Girl Scouts, their leaders and families. And now, let us open our minds and hearts to the loving God of judgment and forgiveness. O God, hear us as we join together in our unison prayer of confession. O God of mercy, you sent Jesus Christ to save lost people. Judge us with your love and lift the burden of our sins. We confess this day that we are twisted by pride. We see ourselves pure when we are stained, and great when we are small. We have failed in love, forgotten to be just, and have turned away from our truth. Have mercy, O God, and forgive our sin, for the sake of Jesus, your son, our savior. Amen. Now let us each within the still small voice of our conscience, make our personal confession before God. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. "Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry, "and whoever believes in my shall never be thirsty. "Go henceforth in newness of heart, "walk in freedom for your sins are forgiven." Let us give thanks for God is good, and God's love is everlasting. Thanks be to God whose love has made us. Thanks be to God whose mercy forgives us. Thanks be to God whose promise secures us. Amen. We welcome to the pulpit this morning the Reverend Robert Young, minister to the university. We would also like to call to your attention that there are booklets for your use during the lent season. They're available in the back of the chancel. We also wish to point out that there is an opportunity for people who are coming to Duke Hospital to avail themselves of host homes. This is a service offered by the larger community for a free room for families to go to when they have loved ones in the hospital. We also need people to volunteer their homes for this service and to help in staffing the desk and in transportation. You will look in your bulletin, you will find further information and how to contact the person in charge. Now let us attend to the word of God. O God, let the power of your transforming spirit shine forth from your holy word. Bless the speaking and hearing of your truth. First, let us listen to the lesson from Exodus 3:1-15. Moses was minding the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, priest of Midian. He led the flock along the side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in the flame of a burning bush. Moses noticed that although the bush was on fire, it was not being burnt up. So he said to himself, "I must go across to see this wonderful site. "Why does not the bush burn away?" When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to look, he called to him out of the bush. "Moses, Moses" and Moses answered. "Yes, I am here." God said, "Come no nearer, take off your sandals. "The place where you're standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your forefathers, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to gaze on God. The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery "of my people in Egypt; I have heard their outcry "against their slave masters. "I have taken heed of their sufferings "and have come down to rescue them from the power of Egypt, "and to bring them out of that

country "into a fine broad land. "It is a land flowing with milk and honey, "the home of Canaanites, Hittites, "Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. "The outcry of the Israelites has now reached me. "Yes, I have seen the brutality "of the Egyptians toward them. "Come now, I will send you to Pharaoh, "and you shall bring my people out of Egypt. "But who am I?" Moses said to God, "That I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring "the Israelites out of Egypt?" God answered, "I am with you. "This shall be the proof that it is I who have sent you. "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, "you shall all worship God here on this mountain." Then Moses said to God, "If I go to the Israelites "and tell them that the God of their forefathers "has sent me to them, and they ask me his name, "what shall I say?" God answered, "I am, that is who I am. "Tell them that I am has sent you to them." And God said further, "You must tell the Israelites this: "that it is Jehovah the God of their forefathers, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob "who has sent you to them. "This is my name forever. "This is my title in every generation." And now let us move to the New Testament lesson, to the Second Epistle with Paul to the Corinthians, chapter five, verses 17 through 21. When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world. The old order has gone, and a new order has already begun. From first to last, this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us men to himself through Christ, and he has enlisted us in this service of reconciliation. What I mean is that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them, and that he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. We come, therefore, as Christ's ambassadors. It is as if God were appealing to you through us. In Christ's name, we implore you, be reconciled to God. Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake, God made him one with the centralness of men so that in him we might be made one with the goodness of God himself. Bless the hearing of this word to our use. (lively organ music) ♪ O be joy, o joy, o joy, joyful in the Lord ♪ ♪ Be joy, o joy, o joy, joyful in the Lord ♪ ♪ All ye hands ♪ ♪ All ye hands ♪ ♪ Be joyful in the Lord ♪ ♪ Joyful in the Lord ♪ ♪ Serve the Lord with gladness ♪ ♪ Serve the Lord with gladness ♪ ♪ And come before his presence with a song ♪ ♪ Be ye sure that the Lord ♪ ♪ He is God ♪ ♪ It is he that hath made us ♪ ♪ And not we ourselves ♪ ♪ O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving ♪ ♪ O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving ♪ ♪ O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving ♪ ♪ O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving ♪ ♪ And into his courts with praise ♪ (echoey choral singing) (worship organ music) ♪ O be thankful, thankful, thankful, thankful unto him ♪ ♪ Be thankful, thankful, thankful, thankful unto him ♪ ♪ Speak good of his Name ♪ ♪ Speak good of his Name ♪ ♪ Be thankful unto him ♪ ♪ Speak good of his Name ♪ ♪ For the Lord is gracious ♪ ♪ For the Lord is gracious ♪ ♪ His mercy is everlasting ♪ ♪ And his truth endureth ♪ ♪ Endureth ♪ ♪ It endureth from generation to generation ♪ ♪ Glory be to the Father ♪ ♪ Glory be to the Father ♪ (echoey choral singing) ♪ As it was in the beginning ♪ ♪ Is now and ever shall be ♪ ♪ Now and ever shall be ♪ ♪ World without end ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- Would the congregation please rise for the reading of the Scripture lesson? The Scripture lesson this morning is from Luke 18 verses one through eight. He spoke to them in a parable to show that they should keep on praying and never lose heart. There was once a judge who cared nothing for God or man. And in the same town there was a widow who constantly came before him, demanding justice against her opponent. For a long time he refused. But in the end, he said to himself, "True, I care nothing for God or man, "but this widow is so great a nuisance "that I will see her righted before she wears me out "with her persistence." The Lord said, "You hear with the unjust judge says, "and will not God vindicate his chosen "who cry out to him day and night "while he listens patiently to them? "I tell you he will vindicate them soon enough, "but when the son of man comes, "will he find faith on earth?" (powerful organ music)

- In the name of the Lord, our God, creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen. Jesus was asked many questions in his day. The questions he was asked then are questions we still ask today. But our Lord had the unusual capacity and the distinctive gift of taking a situation where he was asked a question by the scribes or Pharisees or lawyers or even his disciples and responding to the question with a parable, and leaving his inquirers with an even more difficult and more profound and more important question for them than the question that they had put to him. Thus, in response to the question put to Jesus, who is my neighbor, Jesus told us the parable that we call the parable of the good Samaritan and left his lawyer/interrogator with the question, which of these three who came upon the man beaten and in the ditch, which of these was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves? And then his word go and do likewise. To the question who is righteous, Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and then asked which of these two who had been in the temple, which of these two went away justified? Here in the parable read for our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is answering the Pharisee's question about when is the kingdom of God coming. And he tells his disciples this story, of the widow and the unjust judge, and ends by asking when the son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? The point of this word I think is don't raise a question with Jesus unless you're ready to deal with a more serious question yourself. Or the point may well be, don't ask Jesus for an answer when you are to be searching and probing and struggling for an answer yourself. Or the point may be let us not always think that we know what the most important question really is. For what is at the top of our list may not necessarily be at the top of the list of questions for our Lord. And here in the lesson for this morning I think is a perfect example of this. Today, we may think that the real question, the urgent question, the timely question, the most important question is when, O Lord, is your kingdom coming? When will you return in power and might and glory and in triumph to reign and to rule over the earth? For many good Christian folk today, that is the question: when is Jesus coming again? And Jesus replies, I think, that is an important question. Let me tell you what it will be like when the son of man returns, and in the verses just preceding our lesson for this morning, he describes some of the way that he wants us to understand that it will be when the son of man does return. But then Jesus doesn't leave us there to speculate over the when. No, he moves on to tell the story of the widow and the unjust judge, and ends by asking us the question, the most personal and the most crucial question I believe for them and for us: when the son of man returns, whenever that is, will he indeed find faith on earth? In other words, will you persevere, will you persist, will you be faithful? There are some questions more important than the question of when is the kingdom of God coming. One of those more important questions that Jesus is putting to us I think is how are you living your life? Are you being faithful to the Lord, our God? Will you personally and communally be found with faith? As we know from reading and studying and trying to understand the gospel, Jesus told many parables. We're not always sure about why he told some of them, the specific purpose is often open to debate about many of them. But here, however, in the introduction to this parable, Jesus tells the disciples precisely why he is telling this particular one that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. Now usually when I read or hear or study a parable, I find myself identifying with one or the other particular character in a given parable. Often when I've read a parable many times, I find that I identify with a different person one time and another person another time, or another situation another time. Perhaps this is one of the real beauties of the parables and of the fact that Jesus did tell and each in parables. We can hear them over and over and over again, and it seems as if they give a different message to us each time. The message we hear may well depend on the person we are at that particular moment. The person we identify with in a given

parable may depend on who we are, how old we are, what our responsibilities in life are, where we are ourselves in the pilgrimage of faith. For example, in the parable that we call the parable of the prodigal son, or the waiting father, or the loving father, or the elder brother, or call it whatever you will, you know the one to which I'm referring. In this particular parable, I find myself identifying first with one of the characters and then with another. Sometimes I feel very much like the younger brother and want to take all that is mine and run away. At other times, I find myself identifying with the elder brother. And I find that I want to play it safe, that I want to be secure, that I want to stay at home, that I don't want to venture out to take any risks or to dare at all. At other times, and particularly as our children are growing older, I see myself more and more as the father; not as a godly figure by any means, but as a father who can only wait, who can give freedom and can love and hope and pray. But really only can offer security and acceptance and a home to which our children may always return. But in that parable, as well as in the parable for today, we need to remember that the focus is really on who God is, what the character and nature of God really are, and of what God expects and desires from us. Here's the story of a widow in Jesus' day, a widow who simply wanted the judge to save her from her adversary, to set her free, as it was. Perhaps we need to be reminded that women in Jesus' day had absolutely no power. They had no familial power, they had no legal power, they had no religious or social power, whatever. None whatsoever. Here the judge did, however, have all the power and the authority that this widow needed. The only question was would he hear and respond helpfully to her plea, to her cries? Would he use his power for her good and for her benefit? Would he show mercy to one who had no real claim on his mercy, who had no authority, no power, who was completely and utterly helpless before him? Those are the questions, some of them. Well there are many messages I think in this parable worth noting, even though Jesus has already told us what the main reason for telling this parable is. There is one central message, but perhaps there are other messages, and I think there are. Is this story here to help us to see and understand better God's relationship with the poor, the oppressed and the dispossessed? Is this story to give hope to the outcast, the powerless, the weak and the ignored? Are these the ones, my friends, who finally will be accepted and heard and shown mercy when the kingdom of God is fully present? Or another theme may be, is this a word to give support to the poor and the weak? I don't know how you feel but I think that we cannot help but be impressed by one obvious thread that runs through this story from the very beginning. Even though the woman was weak, even though she was absolutely powerless, even though we assume that she was very poor, even though she had no rights and surely knew that she had no rights, nonetheless this woman was still willing to assert herself, to claim some rights for herself, to stand up unashamedly and unabashedly for what she needed and wanted and felt was important and necessary for her to have life and to live life. It is beautiful, I believe, it is absolutely beautiful; it was then and it is now, to see a person, any person, young or old, black or white, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, the ins or the outs; it is absolutely beautiful, I believe, to see someone stand unflinchingly and unhesitatingly firm and tall and sure in the face of all kinds of odds and insist on being treated fairly and justly and humanely, and that was what she was asking for. And we may not like to see it in others at times when those who are down and out rise up and claim their rightful place in the church or in society or in the world as children of God. But I cannot help believe, my friends, that when any one child of God stands up as this woman did, God almighty surely must rejoice. This woman just simply would not be denied her rightful place. There are people like her around us all over the place today. People who are clamoring to be heard, to be seen, to be recognized, to be treated humanely, fairly, justly. Their voices will be heard, they will be recognized, their rightful place will be given them. Colin Morris, in a little book of his entitled "Unyoung,

Uncolored, Unpoor" says that the real battle that is yet to come will not be between East and West or communist and capitalist, it will not be even between black and white, but it will be between the haves and the have nots. And what I think we're seeing and experiencing here at home and all around the world in so many, many ways is one by one, group by group, nation by nation, people by people, all over this earth, people standing up for themselves and for their own rights and wanting to be treated humanely and fairly and justly. Well, another theme in this may be this: is this story told to tell us that the power to be gracious, to show mercy, to restore people to their rightful place may not really be ours to control? With regard to this parable, some of us were studying it back last summer. And someone posed the question. The question was this: are there ways in which the grace of God is seen as a threat to some of us? Are there any ways in which the grace of God and the way God reveals that grace, are there ways in which you may feel that that grace is a threat to you or to me? Well I think so. There are some us in the church who seem to want to control the grace of God, to say who should be blessed by God and who should not be blessed, to say who should be forgiven by God and who should not be forgiven, to say who should be in and who should be out. Have you ever noticed how some Christians want God's grace to be poured out only on those who believe as they do, or who interpret Scripture as they do, or who behave as they do? How some good church members want only their kind of people in the church? Ever notice that? Well, I have. And somehow or other, those of us who are a part of the church seem to think that we can control the grace of God, or that somehow or other we want to control it. But God says to you and to me, to all of us, "Am I not allowed to do "as I chose with what is mine?" And rather timidly and ashamedly at times, I think we have to say yes, Lord. But we still don't like it, some us anyhow. The poor, the harlots, the adulterers, the outcast, the sick, the weak, these may be the ones to know and receive God's grace, to taste the kingdom of God long before some of the rest of us ever will. And though there were many who felt that she was not entitled to any mercy at all, the judge finally showed mercy. But Jesus tells us that he told this parable to show how we ought always to pray and not lose heart. I think we need that word today, as they did in Jesus' day. Jesus knew that suffering and persecution and hard times would come to the disciples; life would be very, very difficult for them. Before they left this earth, they too would suffer many things before the kingdom would really come. So this parable is told as a word of hope, a word of support, a word of encouragement. The word is be faithful, be persistent, be steady, be loyal, be patient; hold on, never give up. And that word remains a word which we need, even today. But this parable is to show us the character of God and to show us our responsibility before God. And the character of God is that of a God of infinite mercy, of boundless compassion, and of unconditioned love. The point here is that is a scoundrel of a judge, if a human judge who neither fears God nor regards men whatsoever, if somebody like you or like me knows how to show mercy and love and forgiveness, how much more will the Lord, our God, show mercy to all of us? Which one of you, if his sons asks for a loaf of bread, is going to give him a stone? Or which among you, if you child asks for a fish, will give your child a serpent? How much more then, if you know how to give good gifts to your children, will your father, who is in heaven, give good gifts to you? But then responsibility, which is ours here, is a very simple one. Be faithful. Be stubbornly and persistently faithful and true to our Lord. This story is about the widow, about you and me, and about how we are to hold on, to stick with it, to hang in there, to persevere, to persist, to be loyal and to be faithful. But we're not called to do this blindly or with no hope or no assurance or no promise, my friends. No, we do it because we know in whom we have believed because we can say with the psalmist of old, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Because we hear Jesus' words come to us, I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you. Because we hear the word saying it is the Lord, God,

who has made us and not we ourselves. We are his people and the sheep of his pasture. We hear Jesus saying, "Lo, I am with you always, "even to the end of the age." We hear John writing in Revelation, "I am the alpha and the omega, "the beginning and the ending." The word is from the beginning through the ending, the word is eternal. So the question then, is it persistence that pays off? Well I really don't think so. Persistence may be necessary, but it is not persistence which pays off. It is the grace of God. Was it the persistence or the perseverance of Moses that led his people into freedom and into the promised land, or what is the sustaining grace of the Lord almighty? Was it the persistence of the woman who had the disease of the flow of blood, and all she needed was to touch the hem of Jesus' garment? Was it her persistence or was it the healing grace of the Lord, our God, which brought wholeness to her? Was it the persistence of the woman of the city who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head? Was it her persistence which brought her forgiveness and a new sense of purpose and wellbeing in life, or was it the redeeming grace of Jesus, the Christ? Was it the dogged persistence of Zacchaeus to see Jesus and to have some experience with Jesus that brought salvation to his house that particular day, or was it the accepting forgiving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? Was it the faithfulness and the loyalty and the persistence of Peter that made him the one chosen disciple, or was it the understanding, forgiving, healing, restoring grace of the Lord, our God? No, I guess I believe that that woman in the parable this morning could have hammered away at the door of the judge forever. And if the judge at some point had not changed his mind, she could have hammered on forever. And I guess I would like to say or I believe that we could pray to God endlessly, but if it were not God's nature to hear and to respond, then it would be as Paul says about love, it would simply be a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal, and we could go on praying forever if it were not for the grace of God. Persistence then, is that what really pays off now? I don't think so. Persistence could simply be another means of works righteousness, and Paul tells us that it is by grace that we are saved through faith. So I want to contend this morning that our hope for fullness in this life, for wholeness in this day, for meaning moment by moment, for a lasting relationship with the Lord God almighty in this life and in the age to come, that our hope really does not rest on our desire or ability to be persistent. I want to contend that you or I can be as persistent as possible, but unless the one to whom we are pleading hears and understands and responds, we could go on pleading forever. But that, my friends, is the sheer beauty and the loveliness and the goodness of the gospel, that God is going to hear. We can be persistent because we know and can rely on the character and the nature of God to be attentive and caring and concerned and gracious and accepting and forgiving. Amazing grace. For twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and twas grace my fears relieved. Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. Persistence? No. Grace? Yes. God's grace. Amen. (joyful organ music) (echoey choral singing)

- Let us affirm what we believe. We believe in God, who as created and is creating, who has come in the truly human Jesus, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the spirit. We trust God who calls us to be the church, to celebrate life and its fullness, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us; we are not alone. Thanks be to God. The Lord be with you.

- And with your spirit.

- Let us pray. O God of creation, God of history, we come as your people, moved again by the wonder of your power and the promise of your presence. We marvel anew at the surge and hidden currents within the natural world. Snow comes, rains come, the sun bursts forth, and we both struggle against the forces of nature and move within them as your creatures, part of your mysterious world. In the midst of this vibrant affirmation of life, we are ever aware of death, life and death bound together. But in the strength of our lit-ten Easter faith, we rejoice in the good news of the resurrection. Through the dark night of the cross and every dying comes the dawn and rebirth of Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of our eternal salvation. And now, O God, be with all your children, both here present and in distance places. Comfort the troubled, those who struggle against the pain and despair of illness or the loss of someone close and dear. Strengthen those who know loneliness, bitterness, temptation and defeat. Help them to overcome the demons of pride or self-pity. Give new hope to those caught in the tangle of human justice, both victims and victimizer, and those confronting endless days and years behind prison bars. Be especially with all the students, faculty and staff in their travels for rest and renewal with friends and family. Bring them safely to their destination and refresh them for the tasks ahead. Bless the present activities and future possibilities in the lives of those young girls worshipping before you here today. Grant wisdom to all in positions of power and authority. Free them from false fears and the temptations of the love and abuse of power. Liberate our structures from the thrall of social injustice. Make of our nation a wager of peace and reconciliation. And like the widow, let us never cease from crying out for justice, knowing that it is by your grace that justice truly comes. All these petitions we freely ask of you, O God of justice and mercy. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, our advocate and brother, who taught us to pray together. Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (powerful organ music) (echoey choral singing) ♪ Peace be within (murmuring) ♪ (echoey choral singing) (powerful organ music)

- O God, we offer up to you these gifts, knowing that they are but a small portion of all that you have given to us. Bless them to the use of your church so that your kingdom may be become visible in this world. In the name of your son, by the power of the spirit. Amen. (lively organ music)