

“261”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Luke 18:1-8

April 30, 2017 — Third Sunday of Easter

On April 19, 1966, twenty-three year-old Bobbi Gibb got a ride from her mother to the starting line of the Boston Marathon. Dressed in a black bathing suit, her brother's Bermuda shorts and boys' running shoes she'd recently purchased, with her hair clipped shorter than she usually wore it and her head covered with a blue hoodie, Bobbi hid in the bushes and waited for the crack of the starting gun. And when half the pack went by, she stepped into the race and joined them. She finished that race in 3:21:40, ahead of about two-thirds of the field. Of course, all the other runners were men.

At the time, the longest distance were allowed to run in the Olympics was 800 meters. There was fear that a longer distance would injure them. That if they ran that far, they wouldn't be able to have children. Women runners were told that they'd get big legs, they'd grow hair on their chests, or that they'd somehow turn into men.¹

The following year, a twenty year-old Syracuse University student by the name of Kathrine Switzer ran the race officially. She noticed there was no official written rule saying that only men could enter. There was no spot on the entry form to indicate gender. It was simply assumed that a woman would never do such a thing. So Kathrine signed up with, using her initials: “K. V. Switzer.” She was issued a race bib with the number 261 on it.

With the team from Syracuse, Kathrine approached the starting line as snow fell that April morning. One of her teammates told her to wipe off her lipstick to blend in. She refused. After about a mile and a half, the media truck passed Kathrine and spotted her and the photographers started snapping. Alongside the press truck came the race officials' truck, and the race director started to get teased about there being a “girl” in the race.

Now, if we were to form a committee to come up with the perfect name for the race director who's about to become a villain, we would fall so far short of his real name: Jock Semple. Jock Semple got so angry that he made the driver stop the vehicle. Kathrine spotted him in the middle of the road as she passed him, standing there with a felt hat and an overcoat shaking his finger at her as she passed. Next, she heard the sound of his leather shoes, distinct from the rubber soles of the runners.

She jerked her head around and saw this big, vicious-looking man with a contorted face and teeth bared, set to pounce. Before she could do anything, he grabbed her shoulder and flung her back and screamed and cursed at her, telling her to get out of *his* race and to give him her racing bib. He grabbed at the “261.” Suddenly, a fellow Syracuse runner, who happened to be Kathrine's boyfriend, gave ol' Jock Semple a cross-body block and sent him flying.

Kathrine sped from the scene, shaken up and scared and angry. Then she took all of that and turned it into determination and energy. She knew that if she dropped out, no one would take woman runners

¹ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/04/17/524381271/first-woman-to-wear-a-boston-bib-races-again-50-years-later>

seriously any time soon. She finished the race in four hours and twenty minutes, but was later disqualified and expelled from the Amateur Athletic Union.

But Kathrine Switzer had become a celebrity. With the help of her campaigning, the Boston Marathon allowed women to officially race in 1972. She finished second in Boston in 1975, and won the 1974 New York City Marathon. 261, the bib number that Jock Semple had tried to take from her, became a symbol of fearlessness in the face of adversity for female runners — a reminder to persist, and keep running, and to seek justice.

There was a judge in a city, and he didn't fear God, and he had no respect for people. Can you see the judge? He looks kind of like ol' Jock Semple. The judge's face is permanently sour. He doesn't think much of you or you or you, or any of you. He's got no time for your God, nor your whining. He's the decider, he is not interested in your story, no matter how inspirational or heartbreaking it may be. The judge really ought to have his own television show. He'd make millions.

But this judge has a problem. Specifically, he has a widow problem. In many Bibles, this parable is titled "The Persistent Widow." Of course it's a widow — it's just like Jesus to pair the surly judge with the most vulnerable person in the society. A widow, with no rights and no protection under the law of the land. But the law of God is another thing. You see, the only ones looking out for the widow are the religious folks. But since the judge's nemesis is a widow, we can infer that Jesus thought those religious folks might need a reminder that the widow problem was their problem.

Anyway, this widow was driving the judge bananas. "Grant me justice," she'd say. He'd tried everything. He'd carefully described why he was refusing to help her. He'd yelled at her. He'd ignored her. He'd mocked her. He'd threatened her. He'd taken extra long lunch breaks. Still, she returned, seeking justice. It was appalling. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.

Jesus was encouraging the crowds listening to him to persist in prayer and to not give up if justice seemed elusive. Even the judge finally granted a measure of justice, from sheer exhaustion. It's not the reason we would hope for. It's not out of respect for the woman, or love of God, or an enlightenment. It was simply the sheer will to persist and outrun that which holds justice back.

Jesus wanted his hearers to know that if this kind of persistence — this kind of faith put into action — would get justice for the widow even through the judge, then such persistent faith would be heard and met with justice much more quickly by their God of lovingkindness and grace.

Any time that we talk about Big Justice — that long arc, that ancient story — we find ourselves in the same spot. We celebrate what has been accomplished and how things are better than they used to be. And we remind ourselves that much work lies ahead. I think humans have a tendency to want to settle on one or the other: either every struggle is ahead of us and we should all feel very hopeless, or we ought to be happy with the justice we've secured and stop being rabble-rousers. The danger of the doom-and-gloom approach is that it fails to appreciate history and context, which means it fails to learn from the past. And the danger of the "can't we all just get along" approach is that we have a habit of deciding that society has gotten sufficient justice precisely when people who look and think like us have gotten what they needed.

Neither of those approaches on their own are a very good plan for completing a marathon. Justice has been accomplished. Justice is still elusive. We persist in prayer and in faithfulness.

The women of this congregation, for the most part, were not looking to cause a ruckus. They were looking to be the church! But, in the late 1970s, when the pastor and most of the congregation took off because they couldn't accept a woman running the race with the title "elder," these women persisted. Estelle Wilbanks was ordained as Edgewood's first female elder. We're honoring Nell Barron and her husband Preston at noon, but there were so many others who persisted in this place! Wilma Lindberg and Carolun Hammill and Irma Kennedy and Lillian Brewer and Amy Duckworth and Mabel Smith and Inez Jesse and Melba Burgess and Rosamae Mooty. And more! These women who have gone before and now rest, and their friends who live, and their daughters, they all persisted. Some of them never got the acknowledgement they deserved, and they persisted anyway. And the next generation of women in the Presbyterian Church has benefited. This church — along with so many others — exists because of persistent women.

Justice has been accomplished. Justice remains elusive. A friend of ours was recently telling me about traveling for a job interview at a large university. She was wined and dined and then, as she was dropped off at her hotel, the department chair who would be doing the hiring shook her hand, then hugged her, and then tried to kiss her.

When my wife Amber and I were in Minnesota for Thanksgiving, we spent some time with Simon and his family. Simon is the high school senior from down the street who Amber's dad calls when we can't fix his computer problems. Simon is going into engineering, and he's going to Iowa State in the fall, and he's a big dork. We really like Simon.

But in part of our conversation, Simon stated that it's getting to be difficult to be a straight white male in science and engineering. Hard enough, he said, that it would be easier to be a woman. All eyes — mine, my in-laws', Simon's parents' — turned to Amber with an almost barbaric desire to see how she would eviscerate him. Amber, a professor of engineering in a hugely male-dominated field surely would cut this young man down with employment statistics, or funding analysis, or the results of a study. Instead, she simply looked him dead in the eyes and explained, "Simon, in whatever you do, no one will ever assume you are the department secretary."

Two weeks ago today, Kathryn Switzer ran the Boston Marathon, just a few days short of fifty years after that first run. At the age of 70, she finished in 4:44:31 — averaging under eleven minutes per mile. The Boston Marathon is retiring bib number 261. Never again will a woman wearing that number hear footsteps approaching.

Justice has been accomplished. Justice remains elusive. When the people of God are faced with marathon miles, we put our heads down, refuse to wipe off our lipstick (if we're wearing it), and run like the wind.

