

Sermon Title: “Why Bother?”

Amen. Good morning, everyone!

I’m so grateful to Rev. Barber for inviting me, and it’s truly an honor to be here with you today. Now, let me say up front—I am not a pastor or a reverend, far from it. But I’m happy to share how today’s passages resonate with me and with the work I get to do every day.

I grew up as a member of Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church, and while this sermon won’t be as long as a Baptist one, I *do* appreciate that Baptist preachers always put a tag on their text. They name their sermon. So this morning, I’d like to call this one: **“Why Bother?”**

Before we get into the scripture, let me tell you a little about myself. I’m Kyra Atterbury, born and raised in Philadelphia. I grew up right in Germantown—and I still live in the same house I was raised in. I went to the John Jenks School just up the road on Germantown Avenue. My best friend lived on Hartwell Lane, so this neighborhood feels like home to me.

My mom was a teacher—third grade mostly—and I was an only child, which meant I was around a lot of adults... and a *lot* of teachers. That gave me a deep respect for educators—people who pour their hearts, their knowledge, and often their own money into helping children grow.

Like my mom, my life’s work has always centered on education. I did museum education and taught high school for several years, and about 17 years ago, I joined an organization called **Need in Deed**—a Philadelphia nonprofit that partners with 3rd through 8th-grade public school teachers.

Now, I wasn’t a stranger to Need in Deed. My mom, Mary, was one of the very first Need in Deed teachers, so I had seen firsthand the impact it had on her students. I even met Barbara Dundon, our first executive director, when I was about 15 years old. I used to stop by my mom’s classroom after school to help, and I remember watching the activities and the excitement that working with Need in Deed brought the students.

And here's something I love sharing—Need in Deed was actually founded right here at the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. It was born from the vision and faith of three remarkable women—Whim Lynch, Mary Hopkins, and Nikki Wood—who believed that young people could be powerful agents of change when given the chance to connect their learning to the real world. So standing here today feels like a full-circle moment. The seeds planted in this very church decades ago continue to bear fruit in classrooms all across Philadelphia—reminding us that when faith, compassion, and action come together, transformation follows.

As for me, I did teach for a while but, eventually, I reached a point where I thought, “I’m done.” Teaching is sacred work—but it’s also hard work. The pressure to meet standardized test scores that often fail to capture a child’s true intelligence had taken its toll. I loved my students deeply, but I felt worn out by a system that seemed to value numbers more than nurturing.

So when I finally packed up my classroom, I thought I was moving on to a new chapter—I was getting another master’s in child and adolescent therapy. But that very day, as I sat at my computer, an ad for a job at Need in Deed popped up on my screen. Some might call that a coincidence—but I call it divine intervention. It felt as though God whispered, “You’re not done with education yet. I just have a new way for you to serve.”

For those not familiar with Need in Deed, our mission is simple: to transform teaching and learning by connecting the classroom to the real world.

We do that by listening to what students care about in their communities—their strengths, their challenges, their hopes for change. Teachers use those interests to drive academic learning. Then we bring in community partners—people with lived experience—to help students explore issues like gun violence, mental health, or environmental justice.

It’s all about helping young people see that they have a voice and the power to make a difference.

I have had to rely on my relationship with God since I've become the executive director of Need in Deed. I am not someone who seeks the spotlight. And for those of you familiar with the nonprofit world, you'll know it's not for the faint of heart, especially right now, where there are real threats to not only the nonprofit world but to public education in general. We have to stay watchful, and yes, persistent. So, I've had to ask God to help me stay present, to give me the strength and the fortitude to keep going.

And that brings me to the question at the heart of today's message: **Why bother?**

In Luke 18, Jesus tells the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge. The judge, Scripture says, "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Yet this widow kept coming to him, demanding justice. Over and over again, she refused to give up. Eventually, the judge gives in—not because he's righteous, but because she *would not stop bothering him*.

Now, when I read that passage, I can't help but think of one of our Need in Deed teachers. At the start of each school year, she would tell her 3rd graders:

"We're going to pick a topic we care about—something in our community that matters to us—and we're going to learn about it and do something about it. But before we begin," she'd ask them, "*Why bother?*"

Why bother to care? Why bother when it's going to take time, effort, and hard work, and there may be people who believe that 3rd graders are too young to understand complex social issues?

And yet every year, her students would decide together that it *was* worth it—to try to make a difference, even as 8- and 9-year-olds.

That persistence—the willingness to keep showing up—is what I see in both the widow and in our students and teachers. They know change doesn't happen overnight. They know they might be ignored or dismissed. But they keep going anyway. I'll give you a couple of examples of this persistence.

One class I'll never forget chose to study **pollution**. Now this was a number of years ago, before the plastic bag ban in Philadelphia. They learned about the harm caused by plastic bags to the environment and even wrote to the City Council, asking for a ban on plastic bags. Two years later, when the plastic bag ban passed, those students—now in middle school—came back to their old classroom shouting, *“We did it!”*

Another class studied **racism**. They learned about Roger Taney—the Supreme Court Justice who wrote the Dred Scott decision—and were horrified to learn that Philadelphia had a street named after him. They made a video calling for the name to be changed. Four years later, when those students were long out of the 4th grade, the street name was changed.

So yes, we bother.

We bother because it's the right thing to do.

We bother because you never know who is watching or listening.

We bother because, as my church elders used to say about the Lord, *“He may not come when you want Him, but He's always right on time.”*

The prophet **Jeremiah** speaks to this when he describes a *new covenant*—one where God says, *“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”* (Jeremiah 31:33)

Before, the law was external—rules written on stone tablets. But now, Jeremiah says, God has written His law on our hearts. That means the call to justice, to compassion, to persistence—it's already inside us.

The widow knew what was right. She knew justice was owed to her because it was written on her heart. And even though the judge was unjust, she didn't let that stop her.

Paul, in his letter to **Timothy**, echoes this persistence when he says: *“Be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.”* (2 Timothy 4:2) In other words—keep going. Keep teaching, keep loving, keep showing up.

And that's what Need in Deed teachers and students do. They bother. They care. They persist. Even when it's slow. Even when it's hard. Even when it feels like no one's listening.

Because bothering—showing up for justice, for love, for one another—is how we keep God's law alive in the world.

So as we leave today, I invite you to think about the places in your life where you might be called to “bother.”

Where can you persist in the work of justice and compassion?

Who might need you to keep showing up, again and again, even when it's not easy?

Because when we bother for good—when we keep our hands and hearts open—God meets us right there.

Amen.

“Why Bother?” (Family-Service Version)

Good morning, everyone!

I’m so glad to be here today, and I want to thank Rev. Barber for inviting me. Now, I’m not a pastor or a preacher — I’m an educator. But I’m excited to share a story with you about how faith, persistence, and the power of caring connect to the work I do with young people in Philadelphia.

When I was growing up in Germantown, my mom was a teacher — a really good one. She taught 3rd grade, and I used to visit her classroom after school. I remember watching how her students came alive when they got to ask questions, make discoveries, and do projects that mattered to them.

Like my mom, I became a teacher too. And teaching is wonderful — but it’s also hard work. After a while, I thought maybe it was time for me to move on. I even decided to go back to school for counseling. But on the very day I packed up my classroom, an ad for a nonprofit called **Need in Deed** popped up on my computer.

Now, I wasn’t a stranger to Need in Deed. My mom, Mary, was one of the very first Need in Deed teachers, so I had seen firsthand the impact it had on her students. I even met Barbara Dundon, our first executive director, when I was about 15 years old. I used to stop by my mom’s classroom after school to help, and I remember watching the activities and the excitement that working with Need in Deed brought the students.

And here’s something I love sharing—Need in Deed was actually founded right here at the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. It was born from the vision and faith of three remarkable women—Whim Lynch, Mary Hopkins, and Nikki Wood—who believed that young people could be powerful agents of change when given the chance to connect their learning to the real world. So standing here today feels like a full-circle moment. The seeds planted in this very church decades ago continue to bear fruit in classrooms all across Philadelphia—reminding us that when faith, compassion, and action come together, transformation follows.

So, what do we do at Need in Deed?

We work with 3rd through 8th grade teachers in Philadelphia public schools. Together, they help students choose a topic that they care about — something happening in their community — and then they learn about it, study it, and do something to make a difference.

Some classes focus on gun violence. Others study homelessness, mental health, or pollution. And when students connect what they're learning to real life, they see that *their voices matter*.

That brings me to the question for today: **“Why Bother?”**

In our Bible reading from Luke, Jesus tells a story about a woman — a widow — who keeps going to a judge asking for justice. The judge doesn't care about her. In fact, the Bible says he “neither feared God nor cared about people.” But she keeps asking. Over and over again. Until finally, he gives her what she's asking for — not because he's kind, but because she *refuses to give up*.

That's persistence. That's faith.

At Need in Deed, we see that same spirit in our students. One teacher I know starts the year by asking her 3rd graders, “Why bother? Why bother trying to make a difference when it's hard and takes a lot of work?” And every year, the students answer — “Because it's worth it.”

They might only be 8 or 9 years old, but they know that their voices and their actions can change things.

One class studied pollution and learned how harmful plastic bags were to the environment. They wrote to City Council asking for a plastic bag ban. Two years later, when the ban finally passed, those students came running back to their teacher shouting, “We did it!”

Another class studied racism. They found out that Philadelphia had a street named after Roger Taney, the Supreme Court Justice who wrote the Dred Scott decision — the one that said people who escaped slavery could be forced back. Those 4th graders thought that was wrong. So they made a

video asking the city to change the street name. And guess what? A few years later, the street *was* renamed.

So yes — they bothered.

They cared.

They persisted.

And that's what Jesus was teaching in the parable of the widow — to keep showing up, to keep believing, even when the world says “no.”

The prophet Jeremiah says, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” That means God has already placed goodness, justice, and compassion inside us. We just have to listen and act on it.

So kids, when you see something unfair or unkind — **bother**. Speak up. Do what's right.

And grown-ups — when the work feels too heavy or change feels too slow — **bother anyway**. Keep going. Because, as the elders in my church used to say, “God may not come when you want Him, but He's always right on time.”

So this week, I invite you to think:

Where is God calling *you* to bother?

To care a little more, love a little harder, or stand up for what's right?

Because when we bother — when we persist in love and justice — God meets us right there.

Amen.

