

**21st Sunday after Pentecost**

**October 17, 2010**

**Luke 18:1-8 "The Widow's Might"**

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

One of the things that made Jesus stand out in his time was his use of parables, short stories that almost always come with a twist; a new, unexpected or surprising perspective that challenges our assumptions and jolts us into seeing the world in a new way. But this parable doesn't seem to have a twist, a surprise, a turning upside-down, does it? On the face of it, this parable is rather self-explanatory, so clear that the gospel writer himself, Luke, tells us what it is in the introduction: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

And the story that follows is consistent with that introduction: "There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!' He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.'"

Then Jesus uses a rhetorical device, called arguing "from the lesser to the greater." If an unjust judge who cares nothing for others and has no fear of God, will eventually relent and give what is asked for, how much more will God listen to and answer us, the beloved.

The problem is, we know that doesn't always happen. Many of us have prayed, long and hard, often and unceasingly, for something we or those we love desperately needed, and not had those prayers "answered", or at least, not in the way we needed, not the way the widow's urgent and persistent cries were answered.

For many of us, the life of prayer is sometimes too much like Jacob's wrestling in the reading from Genesis today. Wrestling with God, all night, clinging and fighting with God in the dark, but getting nothing but a wound as we limp away, exhausted. I remember well the night, 15 years ago now, that I was notified about my father. That he was in the Emergency Room in Kelowna, having had a stroke and a brain hemorrhage. That he wasn't going to survive, but that they would try to keep him on life support until I could get there. It was a long car ride in the dark, with the kilometers racing by, and for every minute of that ride I looked out into the darkness,

tears streaming down my face, and raged, pleaded, begged, anguished, wrestled with God. Hoping against hope that it wasn't true, that he would pull through, that God could make it happen if I only prayed hard enough.

It didn't happen. He did die, although not before I could get there and say goodbye. So I know, as well as you do, that mere "persistence" in prayer is no guarantee, that if we merely wrestle long enough, if we can just knock on that closed door often enough, our prayers – for the cancer not to grow, for the loved one to finally quit the drinking or the drugs, for the spouse to find employment, for the longed-for and long-awaited child to arrive – will be granted.

What is Jesus teaching us, then, in this parable? Luke says it is to remain persistent in prayer and not to lose heart. But if prayer comes with no guarantee that our prayers will be granted if we only offer it long enough, or devoutly enough, or have enough people to offer it on our behalf, then what is it?

One argument, famously made by C.S. Lewis, is that we don't pray to change God; rather, we pray to change ourselves. To align ourselves with God's will for creation, for our lives. To open ourselves to see the way God sees, to become angry about what makes God angry, to be moved to compassion for those God's heart weeps for.

Certainly, that makes sense if we see what exactly the widow was crying out for: justice, for herself, in her life circumstances. Widows were, after all, among the most insecure and vulnerable of society in Jesus' day. In that time, women were, from birth to death, under the care and protection of the men in their family, beginning with their father, then their husband, and finally, ideally, their son or sons. But in reality, the ideal didn't always come true. If a woman's husband died and she had no sons, or sons who were not yet of legal age, her life and the life of her family became very insecure, as there was no welfare or food banks or death benefits available. If her family of origin, the one in which she grew up, wouldn't take her back, she was effectively homeless and without resources.

Women also did not have the same legal standing as men, in Jesus' time. So we can deduce from the story that if this widow was heading to court day after day, pressing her own case, it meant that she really was alone, with no adult son, brother or father to advocate on her behalf. It meant that she was vulnerable, and that she was desperate, likely for her very survival on the judge seeing that justice was done for her.

Now that makes more sense, especially if we listen more carefully to Jesus' own explanation of his parable: "Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet." Given all God's urgings to us in Scripture — to align ourselves with God's desire for justice for all people and the earth, seeing praying as an opening of ourselves to God's desires, yearnings, probings that then result in action in our lives — make sense.

But again, Jesus' reassurance that God will work justice, and quickly, is hard to count on. Whether it is widows in Jerusalem or Gaza who pray unceasingly for an end to the hostilities between their two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians...or widows in African nations, raising their

grandchildren because their own children have died from AIDS, praying every day for enough food for them to eat, enough money to pay their school fees this semester, enough opportunities for them to escape the grinding poverty...or widows in Guatemala, or Serbia, who pray constantly to merely receive an answer about what exactly has happened to their husbands and sons...it might seem like their pounding on the door for justice goes unheard and unanswered.

Maybe, the issue is not prayer at all, despite what Luke says in his introduction to Jesus' parable. Or at least, it's not about us, about what we should do and how we should do it. We often do read scripture as if it contains insights about us, about human beings, about us collectively and as individuals. But I am reminded, over and over again, that Scripture is ultimately, about God. About God's nature, actions, and relationship with us.

When we look at Scripture in that way, we are used to seeing God in the most powerful figure in the story or parable, and it's understandable why. Of course, God is the most powerful figure in the story, whatever it is. Creator, Parent, Redeemer, Almighty...all powerful words for God in Scripture and in our worship and prayer lives.

And yet, in this story, is it not a bit strange to identify God with the unjust judge: to identify God with someone who has no concern for justice? Is it not strange to promote an understanding that petition is answered because of nagging God into action without any concern for the content of the petition itself? Is it not true that in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Bible Jesus knew, God identifies frequently with the widow and the orphan?

Maybe THAT is it. God identifies with the widow and the orphan. If Scripture really is more about God than it is about us, and God is not the unjust judge in this parable...then I suppose God is the widow. God is the figure in the story who is insecure, vulnerable, desperate...and persistent. The one who does not give up until justice is done, right relationship is restored, the need is met.

Maybe God's power, God's might, is the might of the widow, the mightiness of steadfastness, of persistence, of never giving up, of knocking and knocking and knocking, of wrestling all night with us until we ask for a blessing. At times, it may be our hearts, our minds, our lives, that are the closed door, ignoring God's invitation, call, urging, pleading, to answer, to join God in the work of bringing justice to our communities and the world. And at other times, it may be that God is joining us, as we cry, and plead, and pray, and anguish, and wait. Giving us comfort and strength to endure, to carry on, even in the face of the seemingly unanswered prayer, even in the dark times of justice not being granted, even in the long night of the soul when the struggle seems never-ending.

If so, then Jesus tells us this parable not to explain about how God answers prayer, but rather, to encourage us to trust. To trust that the enduring fabric of reality is embedded with the presence of God who responds to our needs in every moment with compassionate love and a yearning for justice for the whole of creation, and who is waiting for us to respond.

Waiting for *us* to respond because God is love, and love is never coercive. And so God never *imposes* justice. Yes, God does desire justice right now. And so God's immediate response

is that justice be done — and done right now. But because God works only through the willing cooperation of human hearts and minds, actual justice comes at the speed of changed hearts, minds, and behaviour. And — sadly — we all know how fast that is.

Yet, like the widow, God does not give up, even in the face of an unresponsive world, and never will. So, perhaps Luke, the gospel writer, was right all along in his summary of Jesus' parable, that it really is an encouragement for us to "pray always and not to lose heart." Because it would be so easy to do, wouldn't it? Yet God never does. Never gives up on us, on humanity, on the world. This is good news. Thanks be to God!

resource: David Ewart, [www.holytextures.com](http://www.holytextures.com).