

Year C Proper 29 Luke 18 vv 1 to 8 Widow and Judge

This is a fascinating parable – it’s very puzzling although Luke has written an introduction trying to make sense of it. Luke says Jesus is teaching his disciples “about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” Be persistent in prayer like the widow and God will answer. Praying always is an admirable endeavour but that interpretation of this parable places God in the role of the judge and there are some troubling issues with that.

Judges, according to Jehoshaphat in 2nd Chronicles (2 Chr.19:6-7), do not judge on behalf of human beings, but on behalf of God who judges with them. Judges must let the fear of God be upon them. They must act carefully because with God, there is no injustice, no partiality, and no bribe-taking.

The judge in our parable does not sound anything like that. He is unmoved by the widow’s pleas, does not follow God, does not respect his fellow humans, and only ends up giving the widow what she wants because he was annoyed by her pestering and seemingly afraid she would harm him. Although our version says, “so that she may not wear me out by continually coming”, if you then look in the footnote, it says, “so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.” The Greek verb that Luke uses is ***hypopiazein*** – a boxing term that literally means, “to strike under the eye.”

Putting God into the place of this judge to make sense of the parable just doesn’t work. God judges but not like this judge. To hand out justice not based on right or wrong but rather to get rid of an annoying person is not what we learn of God in the Bible. And, unlike the widow, we do not pester an uncaring God with our prayers until God gives in to keep us quiet. We believe God is always ready to hear us, knows our needs before we even ask. Jesus says he is the one coming to us – knocking on our door (Rev.3:20).

Some people try to rescue this parable by saying, “Well then, God must be the widow – the persistent one – constantly pushing for justice until she gets it.” That makes some sense. Readers tend to cheer for the widow because that’s what we’ve been trained to do. Widows in the Bible are characterized as being in need of defense...God defends the widows. Jesus has come to defend the widows. Luke sets us up to side with the widow by highlighting persistence as good in his introduction to the parable.

But, just like the parable gives us a judge who challenges our idea of how a judge should behave, the parable gives us a widow who challenges our idea of a stereotypical biblical widow. This woman is not poor and helpless. The fact that she keeps showing up in court means she’s got some money. And she’s not a helpless creature meekly on her knees pleading for help. Remember – the judge is actually worried she’ll do him harm. This woman has been making threats as she cries for justice to be granted to her. Most English versions use the word “justice” (*dikaiosyne*) when, actually, the Greek word used by the widow means “to be avenged” (*ekdikeo*). The widow is asking for vengeance. The word also means “to be vindicated,” and that could be in a good way or it could be in a bad way...we can’t be sure.

God certainly wants justice granted, in fact, God is the one who hands out the judgement – God is asked to deal with those who are evil from birth, those who are oppressing God’s chosen ones but God does *not* threaten violence – threatening to strike believers under the eye – in order to frighten or to annoy believers into doing justice on his behalf. Besides, if God is the widow, that puts us in the role of the judge – only working for justice when we’ve had enough of God nagging at us and threatening us. Interpreting God as the widow doesn’t work either.

So, if God is not the judge and God is not the widow, and we are not the judge or the widow, where does that leave us with this parable? How do we make sense of it?

Amy-Jill Levine says maybe our job isn't to rescue this parable, by finding a way to see ourselves and God somehow in the parable...our job is not to rescue this parable but to resist it. Amy-Jill Levine is a new Testament scholar and she offers an interesting, knowledgeable view because she is Jewish. She reminds us that parables are designed to shake up our worldview, to question the conventional. Parables surprise, they shock, they disturb. There is nothing shocking or worldview shaking about persistently praying for the same thing. While that is commendable, there is no reason to think that a widow's badgering a judge would be understood by Jesus' listeners as about prayer to God. Jesus tells his disciples a very short story about a judge and a widow, both with questionable characteristics; the judge is not inclined to grant the widow's request but, because of her persistence and threats, he does.

This parable disturbs because it prevents us from forming a positive assessment of either character. Neither are even very likeable but, most of us struggle to find their good qualities. Most of us try to rescue the widow. We want to be able to think in terms of good and bad. We want right and wrong, righteous and sinful, "us" and "them".

We have two morally questionable characters who become complicit in a plan possibly to take vengeance and certainly not to find reconciliation. And that is where Jesus leaves it – with a corrupt judge and a widow that takes advantage of that. Jesus leaves his characters knee deep in systemic corruption, collusion, oppression, and vengeance. We can sure relate to that because we are knee deep in it too. All of us must deal with banks and insurance companies and other large corporations with systemic problems – from who they do or do not hire to the rich CEO making questionable use of company funds. Maybe we worry that our "off the rack" clothing was made in a "sweatshop."

We live in a world that unfortunately contains systemic racism, oppression, violence, and corruption.

This is what we need to resist in the parable and this is what we must resist in our world. How do we do that? I actually think Luke made a brilliant suggestion. Luke says Jesus was teaching his disciples “about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” This parable is about prayer but it is not telling us to persistently ask for what we want like the widow does. Prayer is not all about asking for what we want. Prayer is all about being in relationship with God. Prayer is the place where we open ourselves up to God’s love, where we express our love for God, and where we are transformed into God’s love. Prayer is the place where we abandon ourselves to God’s will, where God’s desires become our desires. That is what we are striving for. As we draw closer and closer to God in prayer, allowing ourselves to be transformed by God’s love, and listening to hear what God wants, we can survive in this systemically broken world through this closeness with God in prayer. We learn how to fix some of this brokenness through hearing what God wants in prayer. We radiate the warmth and light of God’s love into the dreary bits of this world by being transformed into God’s love in prayer.

In Luke 18, Jesus is well on his way to Jerusalem to his rendezvous with the cross.

When he gets there, on the night before he dies, the night he is betrayed, Jesus will pray in Gethsemane. He will make a request of God – “if possible,” he says, “remove this cup from me.” However, his prayer is ultimately a request for, and an expression of his desires aligning with God's desire for he continues with, "Not what I want, but what you want." “What you desire is my ultimate desire," he says.

The prayer he makes is about a profound trust in God's character, God's faithfulness and love and promise. He does not appeal to God as a judge who is stingy and grudging

with justice, nor does he pray like the fist-shaking widow threatening to inflict a black eye. Instead, he makes his prayer, "I pray for what you desire."

I have shared this before but it is worth sharing again...In the movie *Shadowlands*, there is a scene when CS Lewis returns to the university after time spent at the hospital bedside of his cancer-stricken love, Joy Davidman. He's asked by the chaplain and faculty, "What's the news?" Lewis answers, "Good news, I believe; yes, good news." He is referring to having married Davidman. *They* think he means her cancer has been cured.

"That's wonderful," they respond. "You've been praying for this for a long time."

Lewis's response is this: "That's not why I pray," he says. "I pray because I need to pray, because every part of me yearns to pray." He concludes, "It doesn't change God; it changes me."

When the Son of Man comes, may he find us praying, trusting in a good God, a God who is just, a God whose desires have taken root in our hearts and lives. Let us pray not in order to change God, but so God may change us. "Love to pray," Mother Teresa instructs us. "Take the trouble to pray. Prayer opens your heart until it is big enough to hold and keep God. We must know Jesus in prayer," she says, "before we can see him in the broken[ness of the world]" (*Mother Teresa Her Essential Wisdom*, p.55).

At the end of his story, Jesus sets up a contrast for us between God and the unjust judge. In contrast to the judge who waits and waits before giving in to the widow, Jesus asks, "Will God delay long in helping those who pray for help?" He doesn't wait for his disciples to respond. He gives them the answer. "No," Jesus tells them. "God will quickly grant justice to those who call on him."

We are not meant to see God in the unjust judge and we are not meant to badger and threaten as the widow does. Jesus shows us these people so that we will know that, with God's help, we will resist such as these and not become like such as these.

Luke was right in his introduction to this story after all: Jesus has told us a parable about the need to pray always and to not lose heart. "Jesus persisted in giving life and power and hope. Jesus perseveres in loving us into power. Jesus empowers us to persevere and to act in the face of all sorts of injustices. Jesus empowers us to persevere and to wrestle in the face of haunting daytime and nighttime questions. Jesus empowers us to persevere and to hang in there in the face of the pain and difficulties of our lives" (Augsberg Sermons Year C, p.224). For God is there in the midst of the struggle, holding onto us in steadfast love.

Prayer does not change God. Prayer changes us. In being changed, we then can change the world. When Mother Teresa was crossing into Gaza, she was asked at the checkpoint if she was carrying any weapons. "Oh, yes," she replied. "My prayer books" (*Mother Teresa*, p.57).