

Taking the parable home

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Jesus told his disciples 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." Luke 18:1-8

If you and I lived in a time and place where parables were commonplace, we would all know that you never start a parable by telling what it means. A parable may in fact have one primary, obvious and worthwhile take-away. But to qualify as a parable, it has to be stretchy. An angle or possibility that you never saw before may suddenly emerge. You've always known that some parable is about *them*. You've used it as a polishing rag for your smug satisfaction. Then the parable turns on you, takes your breath away, convicts you, maybe even moves you to some life-saving act of love or justice.

Today's gospel text features a parable told by Jesus that is now known as the parable of the unjust judge or, alternately, the parable of the persistent widow. Jesus himself does not begin the parable by telling us what it means, but the gospel author, or perhaps some later editor, clearly felt compelled to begin with a spoiler: "*Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*"

Fortunately for me as a preacher, the spoiler does prepare us to consider the tenacity of the widow whom Jesus so deftly sketches. In the translation we heard, the calloused but worn-down judge explains, "*I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out ...*" Several commentators insist that a more literal and apt translation would be, "*I will grant her justice, so that she won't give me a black eye ...*"¹ That's a lot more vivid than 'wear me out,' isn't it? This widow is pugnacious, unflappable. She will not take no for an answer. And Jesus commends her example.

You or I might respond to this facet of the parable by asking: How is my prayer life? Is God at risk of getting a black eye because of my tenacity in prayer?

Notice how the spoiler also suggests a related premise may strike home for many of us. "*Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*" Many of us here, I'm sure, need to be encouraged *not to lose heart*. We've been carrying that heavy load for so long. The news headlines have become unbearable. Or what about all of our sincere, sacrificial hard work – for which we've been demonized instead of praised. We are tempted to lose heart.

Or maybe we are most of the way to reaching a dream, but it's become a lot harder – more complicated, more political, more costly – than we ever imagined when we began. That was likely the situation of the disciples here at the start of Chapter 18 in Luke's gospel. The drumbeat of Jerusalem grows louder. The crowds have grown larger and more desperate. the teachings of Jesus more demanding, the authorities' threats more aggressive.

Any of us here this morning who are presently tempted to lose heart may at least take some solace from seeing we are in good company. The very closest followers of Jesus – those who saw him, touched him, knew his voice – even they were apparently vulnerable to losing heart! Jesus timely raises up the example of the tenacious widow—for them and for us!

Persevere in your convictions and your faith!

Don't stop now!

Keep going!

All of this supposes that the gospel author's introduction to the parable provides THE definitive interpretation, or the only interpretations. But if we poke around just a bit, other themes and provocations quickly emerge. What about justice, for instance? Valuable as prayer and not losing heart may be, they are largely, for most of us, personal and subjective features of faith. And in any case, take note that losing heart does not seem conceivable for this widow. She wants justice! She demands justice. We don't see even the tiniest crack in her resolve.

The justice angle becomes all the more poignant when we consider that in the time of Jesus, according to one scholar's notes, only men could make a case before a judge.² So what is she doing there in the first place? The audacity! Well, here is Luke again, getting on his unique gospel soapbox, insisting that Jesus sought and seeks to expose and mess up the ways of the world, confronting dynamics of rich and poor, the powerful and powerless.

We all know, as does God, that the dynamics and disparities that animate this parable endure. The privileged buy better test scores and college admissions for their kids. Billionaires self-fund their elections. More than 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, we continue to diminish, rationalize and ignore so much violence against persons of color.

It didn't happen.

It was self-defense.

Uh, the video's been lost.

Luke uniquely populates his gospel with widows, a number of whom are not found in any other gospel. They are emblematic of all who are powerless, *and* Luke also shows widows to be prophets, provocateurs and exemplars of faith. Widows would have been largely absent from the news headlines of Jesus' time until he puts them on stage and asks his original listeners and us about what in the world we see in them with regard to inequality and what, in God's name, we intend to do about it.

Knowing that many of Jesus' followers were not particularly well-served by the prevailing currencies of privilege, one apparent aim of this parable may have been to encourage the patience of a divine perspective, belief that God's justice will in time prevail, even if not now: "*...will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?*"

In the passage as we heard it, Jesus clearly compares the crackpot justice practiced by the self-serving judge to the more perfect justice we can imagine in the heart and plans of God. But one Lutheran pastor and author named Mike Sherer opens up another justice-related provocation and turns the parable inside out when he wonders if "*in the original form of this parable (the original intent, to be more precise), God is the woman,*" the widow, "*and the unjust judge is the community*" to whom the gospel was first addressed.⁴ Sherer is here asking us to look at the part of ourselves that is like the self-serving judge, failing to respond to even the most conspicuous and persistent needs at our doorstep, rationalizing them away.

I have other, more important, priorities.

Shouldn't the social worker handle this?

I tried to help them last time. Look how that turned out.

They'll never change. Why try?

Well?

It can be valuable and curious to examine the possible meaning or meanings of today's parable for those first disciples of Jesus, or the original intended audience of Luke's gospel. But for today the most valuable interpretation of the parable will rely on us. What will we make of it? What will we do with it? Some of us may be renewed in our prayers and be kept from losing heart. Some of us may better recognize and be renewed in our trust in God's ultimate and perfect justice. Some of us may be moved to finally open a door to that urgent need that for so long we have minimized and ignored. Or maybe you have seen another angle, will respond another way. Thanks be to God!

The most critical interpretation of the parable will be the one that you and I take home, or the one that we take to heart as we stay on the journey toward Jerusalem. It will be the understanding that keeps the witness of Jesus alive, in us and among us, in our hearts and in the world. *Amen.*

¹ e.g. Jones, Peter Rhea, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1999, p. 331.

² Sorry, I lost the reference and in looking for it found at least one other scholar who might contest the claim.

³ ELCA pastor and author Michael L. Sherer was responding to an excellent exegesis of the text (Luke 18:1-8) by the Rev. Meda Stamper, found at www.workingpreacher.org.