

SLD10.17.10 30th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 18-1-8
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News Flash: The Judge Is Not God. Are We the Widow?

Following the conclusion of a variety of sermon series: the Creation series, the Galatians series, the Summer Saints, this Sunday we're finally getting back to lectionary, that three year calendar of scripture that keeps preachers honest and listeners exposed to the broad reaches of the Bible. When preaching lectionary, a preacher doesn't get randomly to choose the sermon text; it is given each Sunday, and whether she likes it or not, the preacher just has to deal with it. Dealing with today's text reminds me why preaching lectionary is considered a discipline. Because I would not necessarily have chosen to deal with today's text.

Because on first pass, today's text, the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge, appears forever to be teaching that if we just pester God long enough, or annoyingly enough, or with the right mix of sincerity, humility and critical mass, God will surely deliver what we want.

And we know better, do we not?

Yet isn't Jesus saying in this parable that if even this creepy, unconscionable, faithless judge eventually capitulates to the railing of the persistently pleading widow, how much more likely, and quickly, will our faithful God grant the imploring requests of God's beloved ones? Isn't Jesus saying that if we just keep at it, we can wear God down like a weary parent, an approach that certainly works for my son, Christopher, who knows just when I haven't got a spare minute or brain cell or mitochondrion of energy left to resist his demands.

And certainly from Christopher's perspective, I am never a better parent than when I give him what he wants.

Anybody here feel like that about God? I know I sometimes do. I know better, just like you do. But once in a while we just can't help measuring the effectiveness of prayer by whether or not we get what we ask for. Especially when we really, really, *really* want it.

And when prayer disappoints us, what do we wonder? Why did God let this happen? Why isn't God listening to me? How can I make God relent?

We *know* better. I know we do. We *know*, you and I, that prayer is not finally meant to align God with us, but to align *us* with God. "*Thy* will be done" is the way Jesus' model prayer goes. *Thy* will, not *mine*. Most of us know very well that regarding prayer as a means to get God to cooperate with our plan is spiritually immature, as is measuring God's faithfulness by whether or not we get our way.

We *know* it...but we do it anyway.

And then this parable rolls around describing a judge capitulating to a widow's persistent pleading and what are we supposed to think except that if we simply pray louder and longer and more faithfully, we can get God to cooperate with our desires? So when I first read the darn thing, I felt a little discouraged, as if the very text were working against whatever vestiges of spiritual maturity I fancied we had.

So I start scanning, scanning, scanning the lines of the text for some clue as to how respectfully to spin this tale. Surely it doesn't mean what it sounds like it means. For one thing, when is Jesus ever a straight shooter? His disciples are continually fretting over the guy never just says what he means and means what he says.

You know, back when Jesus first starts telling parables, his disciples ask him what they're supposed to mean. "Ah," says Jesus, "To you it has been given to know the

mysteries of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening, they may not understand.'" (Luke 8:9) Which made the disciples feel really good at first – they get to understand what Jesus is talking about even if others don't - until it becomes apparent that they also have no clue.

So what is Jesus *really* trying to say in this story about the widow and the judge? Who or what does the widow represent, and who, or what, the judge? What mystery of the kingdom of God is Jesus to give us to understand?

Until it dawned on me – what if the people in this parable are just the people in this parable. What if they don't represent anybody but who they are? What if the widow in this story is just... a widow. Some woman who's lost her husband and therefore her means of support and place in her community. Somebody with few or no resources except as provided by the law. And so she's appealing to the law to attain what the law is designed to offer.

What if, unlike the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, or the woman in the Parable of the Lost Coin, in *this* parable, the judge isn't actually meant to represent God. Maybe in this parable, the judge is actually meant to be a first century civil servant of the local judicial system who has the power to decide things about other people's lives. Maybe in this parable, the judge is just a...judge.

Unexpected as it may be, maybe this parable is only about what it sounds like it's about, a transaction between a powerless person with a legitimate complaint and a wickedly indifferent judicial bureaucrat. The widow won't let up, and finally the judge capitulates. But what if the story is more about the widow than the judge. What if it's less about how to get the judge to capitulate than it is how to approach justice in the first place.

When in doubt, read the directions. One clue (that I completely overlooked the first twelve times I read the passage) is Luke opens the parable by explaining quite clearly that Jesus is telling the parable to remind his followers of their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

Oh.

Only indirectly is this a parable about God. Directly, it's a parable about us.

So if the judge is not meant to represent a pliant (even fickle) God, what does the judge represent?

A closer guess might be that the judge represents worldly power. That is, the way you and I and our systems and our communities understand power. You know, the confident perspective that we law-abiding, decent and orderly American Presbyterians know what's best, know how things should be done, what rules should be followed, as well as what consequences are appropriate when they are not.

That's who the judge is in this story. He's just a judge. Not the God in charge, but the *man* in charge. And it happens that, for all his training and position, this particular man in charge is neither righteous nor even conscientious. He finds the widow with her trifling concerns beneath his attention. Yet she keeps showing up and showing up and pestering him, like a mongrel dog worrying a brittle bone, and he wants to be rid of her.

Does she have a case? Perhaps, had he taken the time to listen to her. But really, who cares? To the judge, the widow is just a squeaky wheel on the smooth road of entitlement, a minor break in the fertile commerce of favors, an annoying fly in the ointment of presumptive power. Basically he just wants her to go away.

The judge is you and me and everybody else in this world who has the power of place, of family, of education, of wealth, of community, of the law. The judge is anybody

with the power to make decision about other people, anybody who governs, or manages or, well, judges, others. How could I have thought for a moment that the judge in this story represented God? This judge is not God, this judge is temporal power, and those of us who wield it.

And the widow? In some respects, I suppose the widow also is us. Temporal pain, weakness, injustice, oppression, marginalization, suffering, demanding justice from the powers that be. Although, in truth, even the widow is capable of ratcheting up her own energy, influence and anger to get what she wants.

To be sure, some are better at this than others.

There's a familial phenomenon among my sisters and me called "Oglesby rage." It's not pretty. It's arrogant and steely and mean, relentlessly focused and unswervingly determined. And kind of scary. We learned it from our mother.

Like a nuclear laser beam trained on a field mouse, Oglesby rage is usually effective at obliterating resistance. Hardly a Krogers cashier or a Macy's sales clerk is left standing upon the issue of Oglesby icy outrage. "I'd like to speak to your supervisor."

But the widow in Jesus' parable isn't like that. She doesn't gird up her loinettes with Oglesby outrage and focus all her energy and anger on getting what she wants. She doesn't mobilize all her friends and connections – okay, maybe she doesn't have any – but she doesn't appear to be expecting anyone else to join her effort. The widow doesn't make a stab at overwhelming the judge, or bullying him, or appealing to his superiors. In fact, the widow in this story doesn't *make* anything happen.

No, the widow in this tale is armed only with her legitimate claim before the law, her clear petition for justice. In fact, so confident is the widow of her petition, and so trusting of the system to supply her needs that, regardless of the judge's reaction, she just keeps

showing up and asking for what she knows is hers. She may not know when, or how, but sooner or later, with or without the cooperation of this earthly judge, the widow seems confident that justice will, in the end, prevail.

And *that*, says Jesus, is how we should pray. And *that*, says Luke, is why Jesus is telling this story. Not to motivate us to keep hammering at God to get our way, not to encourage us to mobilize all our resources, and we have many, to make happen what we believe *should* happen. But to pray to our God with the quiet, earnest, persistent confidence that sooner or later, with or without the cooperation of earthly power, justice will prevail.

For *unlike* the judge, our God is the very source of righteousness. And *unlike* the judge, the God who creates us *engages and responds* to us. And *unlike* the judge, God has our best interests at heart. Therefore, says Jesus, how much more than this unjust judge who fears neither God nor respects his community, can we trust our gracious God to, in God's own time, grant justice to God's beloved ones?

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge is not a parable about God's commitment to give us what we ask, or how to wear God down to get our way. It's a parable about *our* need to trust and surrender to God, to pray always in quiet confidence and expectant anticipation that the One who is the Source of justice will, in God's own time, deliver it. This is a parable, says Luke, about our need to pray always and not to lose heart.

And at the end of his parable, Jesus wonders aloud if, when he returns, as he is forever doing, he will find such faith on earth.

I don't know. Will he?

To the glory of God. Amen.