

Weary Justice From A Lazy Judge

(Luke 18: 1-8)

October 23, 2016

There's not much question as to the meaning of this parable of the widow and the unjust judge because Luke tells us why the parable is important before he tells it. This is a story about persistence, the value of a "Hang In There" mentality. It is, isn't that right?

There is this judge, says Jesus. We know about judges and their role: to maintain a reasonable harmony in the community and to adjudicate disputes fairly, impartially. It is worth remembering that Jewish law (the Torah) described the responsibility for judges when it came to protecting the rights of poor widows and orphans. Jesus says: there is this widow. And therein lies the plot. The choice of character automatically raises the stakes for the judge, because any God-fearing jurist would feel obliged by the Torah to take especially good care of her.

The problem is that this jurist is not God-fearing and not especially interested in justice at all. And so he tries to ignore the widow's pleading. But the widow is not going to take "no" for an answer. She keeps coming back to him day after day, resolutely pressing her case, until finally the judge has a conversation with himself. In Luke, remember: the rich fool, the prodigal son, the dishonest steward - all of them talk to themselves. But this judge figures that if he doesn't grant the widow's petition, she will wear him out and make his days long and miserable. So, despite his callousness and his lack of integrity, he gives the woman what she wants. Of course, if persistence is the point - and it seems to be - then we have a dilemma, if we are honest with God and ourselves. The dilemma is that for over two thousand years later the poor and oppressed are still calling out for relief and, for the most part, don't seem to be appreciably closer to a world of justice and compassion than they were when Jesus told the parable.

Don't get me wrong. I believe persistence in our faith journey is very important, even when such journeys do not unfold in the ways we think best. It is important to be unrelenting. Preacher, writer, theologian Frederick Buechner, said years ago, persistence is a key, "not because you have to beat a path to God's door before [God will] open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of getting to your door." Buechner's comment makes me think that maybe there's more here than meets the eye.

Another New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper says, "To those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow, the orphan and the stranger but do not [do so], the call is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of their lives."

What if we stand this parable on its head and hear it as a testimony not to the persistence of the widow but of God, who wants us to grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry out day and night? Might this parable speak

to the resolute, persistent, unrelenting, determined One who keeps knocking on our door, challenging us to respond, pressing us to accept God's claims, urging us to work for the good of neighbors in need?

A few years ago we saw the film, *Hotel Rwanda*, the difficult story of what happened in Rwanda in 1994, when that African nation descended into madness, with the powerful Hutu majority beginning a systematic slaughter of the Tutsi minority (the Hutus killed 800,000 Tutsis). The film tells the story of that horror through the person of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager in the Rwandan capital, who ended up finding the courage to shelter and save over 1,200 people by hiding them in the luxury hotel he managed.

As the horror built, Paul initially protested that there was nothing he could do. About midway through the story, as the slaughter of the Tutsi people escalated, Western reporters began to capture scenes of the genocide on film. Paul was heartened a bit, because he assumed the broadcast of such images would prompt immediate Western intervention. When a skeptical Western reporter expressed doubt, Paul was dumbfounded. "How can they see that and not intervene?" he asked. But the reporter had seen it all before. "More likely," he responded, "people will see the footage, say 'Isn't that horrible?' and then go right on with their dinners." It was for me a particularly disturbing moment in a deeply disturbing film, for I knew he was right. Who could see and hear that exchange and not feel shame?

Did the persistent widow shame the judge into action? Shame could be our full-time preoccupation. Across the span of our lifetimes we have experienced a steady drumbeat of news reports of injustice after injustice, perpetrated by one group or another. And what has been done?

In this country, of course, some civil rights laws were established; and they have brought some progress, though such progress more often seems to follow the path of a pendulum than of an arrow. We have seen some of the worst offenders elsewhere being brought before international tribunals and tried for crimes against humanity. We've watched celebrities, like Gord Downie of the "Tragically Hip", who has staged concerts to raise awareness and try to end poverty in our time of our Indigenous Community. But many of us, seeing such things, have spoken our laments and then have gone right back to our dinners or whatever else we had been doing.

So, I wonder: if this parable offers a mirror for our lives, as Jesus said, "who neither feared God nor had respect for people." Is there any place for us in this story?

Oh, it's not very flattering to read the parable that way, to be sure. Who wants to be thus characterized? But maybe the good news in this story for the non-outcasts - for the rest of us - is that God is like the widow - unrelenting, persistent, assertive. God hasn't given up on us, even when we have acted as though we "neither feared God nor had respect for people." So maybe there's hope, not only for the widows and orphans and sojourners of this world, but for us. I believe there is. More importantly, I believe God believes there is.

"Behold," says the Christ, "I stand at the door and knock." Maybe today we'll open the door. Maybe. And what a good day that would be...for everyone!

Prayer: "O Lord, let that day come. Let it come. Amen."