

June 2

The Widow and the Judge

Luke 18:1-8

Today we look at a parable that causes many people to wonder just what point Jesus was trying to make. The problem is that most interpreters, even in the Gospels, have made it into an allegory where God is the judge and the widow is one of the faithful praying for help. The moment we do this, questions abound. It seems to imply that God only answers our prayers when we badger God into submission. This seems to make God into an uncaring deity who is not really in touch with our concerns. What happens if we do not allegorize it but instead let it stand on its own as a parable about an unjust judge and a widow? This is likely how Jesus' listeners would have heard it. Most scholars believe that the parable is verses 2-5. The verse before and verses after seem to be commentary by Luke. This is where the troubles begin, for it then says it is a parable to encourage us to pray continuously and not be discouraged, and the end says God will provide justice better than this judge, who was forced to give it. Not an appealing view of God, is it? Looking at just the parable, the judge is not inclined to grant the widow's request, but because of her persistence and her threats, he does. That's it. There is still much to learn from that truncated story.

We assume the widow to be old, poor and powerless. There is nothing in the parable to support those assumptions. We also assume the widow must be a decent person. Does it change your view when you hear that the word justice has more of the sense, "let me be avenged." Is she asking for justice or vengeance? Does she really want to reach a just agreement or does she want the judge to punish someone.

We side with the widow in the story because we don't like the judge, whom Jesus describes as not fearing God and not caring about what people think. In verse six Luke calls him unjust. But at what point does he become unjust? Was he always unjust or only after he gives into the widow's request? It says that, because she keeps bothering him, the judge will grant her what she desires. He doesn't do it because he thinks she is right, it is because she is wearing him down with her persistence.

Here is a something I learned in looking anew at this parable that Jesus' listeners would have understood but we miss. Wear me out is a boxing term that can also be translated, strike me in the face, or give me a black eye. In this context, the judge seems to be scared of physical harm and so grants her request. So much for the feeble older widow!! In some ways this is a story about corruption, violence and vengeance.

Luke wants us to side with the widow. That is why we have his commentary bracketing this parable. Jesus, on the other hand seems to present two characters, neither of whom are likeable. Yet, through their actions we learn a little about ourselves and how we sometimes relate to God. If we strip away the allegorical interpretations that have always clung to this parable, Jesus seems to ask us to think about the difference between justice and vengeance.

Jesus was invested in fairness, reconciliation, and compassion. These are traits sorely missing in this parable. It makes me wonder how often, when we really think about it, do our prayers and actions reflect those of the widow instead of the values of Christ? Do we appear to God to be like the widow, wanting justice that is really a polite term for the vengeance we hope happens against someone who has hurt us or someone we love? I believe that through this story Jesus was asking us to look at our own values, opinions and desires and see if they are aligned with his.

That is a tough thought to have to deal with, isn't it? The widow was not living the values that Jesus prized so much, the values upon which he based his whole concept of the Community or Kingdom of God. And sometimes, we may align our desires more with her vengeful thoughts than with Jesus's ideas of community and forgiveness.

Even more challenging, do we at times appear to God and to others like the unjust Judge? I wonder if sometimes, because of our actions, others see us with a cynical eye, believing that we will always do that which is best for us. The judge was looking out first and foremost for his best interest. In the beginning he did not grant the request. We don't know why but since he is called unjust it is likely that it was not in his best interest to do what she asked. Why possibly alienate another who might have more wealth and influence? A widow was usually without property and usually had limited resources. Helping her with her concerns didn't help him. But her persistence and

threats cause him to grant her requests. He did it, not because it was the right thing to do, but for self-protection. Perhaps all of us have, at times, been motivated more by self-interest than by grace.

Or, perhaps we are like the judge in that someone might actually want our help to bring about reconciliation. This is often in a family situation. In this case, I am saying that the widow's call for justice was proper. For a variety of reasons we refuse. We have all sorts of reasons for not wanting to help. We finally help because we are forced to by others. Whenever we are motivated by self-interest instead of the values of Christ we are, to use an old phrase, "talking the talk but not walking the walk" of faith.

So now that we have heard the ways these two individuals challenge us to look more carefully at our own values and motivations, what more can or should we take from this parable?

I do believe the persistence of the widow is something Jesus would commend. He often reminds us to pray constantly and let our petitions be known to God. This parable does not require us to change from that understanding. What I hear it saying is that when we pray constantly about something we need to pray with a compassionate and open heart. We have to remind ourselves that what we want is not always what God might do. We have to remind ourselves that our motives are not always as pure as we might want them to be. And we need to pray with trust instead of with threats. We see in the widow how things escalate when she doesn't get her way. Sometimes we do the same, threatening to never go to church again or some other such threat if God does not grant our request. To pray constantly, yes, but in an open, not demanding way.

Also, when we hear requests from others we need to listen lovingly. We reflect not on whether we have the time, or we want to do it, or any other self-directed measurement, but whether it fits into the realm of God. To listen with an openness is hard to do at times. But I also hear it saying that we need to ultimately live a life that is loyal to God instead of one that changes, as the winds of social pressure blow against our lives.

In closing let me give you two short stories. First about persistent prayer. She was angry at what he had done and knew in her heart she could never forgive him. For a number of years she kept asking God to make him pay for what he had done. She was not really wanting justice but vengeance. She became angry with God when the man continued on in life without any consequences occurring for the deeds he had done. Yet, her anger and bitterness at him and at God was destroying her faith and her relationships with others who did not want to keep rehearsing the stories of his past misdeeds. Finally, one day she decided to change her prayer. Instead of praying for God to bring the man to justice she started praying for God to heal her of her anger. She made sure to take steps to ensure that he would never hurt her or ones she loved, but otherwise she released him from her conscious thought. God began to heal her bitterness and this healing was more beneficial to her than any satisfaction she might have gotten if her pleas for vengeance had been enacted.

The other is a recent story I saw where a man was asked to help tutor a young immigrant boy. He needed a good male role model. The man was busy and had never done any teaching. It would take time and study on his part to do a good job. His first response was, "No, I don't have the time." The person asking him came back in a week and asked him to think about it and pray about it. He finally set aside self-concerns and asked, in prayer, if this is something God wanted him to do. The more he prayed, the more he felt that this was a task he was to take on. The boy was about eight when they began. He was sure it would be a year, or at most two, commitment. The story was written as the boy was graduating from college. Each Wednesday night for more than a decade they spent time together studying and learning. The man says it is the most wonderful and rewarding thing he ever has done and he almost missed it by saying no.

The parable in its simplicity helps us to see the mixed motives we bring to many of our requests and prayers. God is still involved and when we let go of what we want, and listen, and strive to live the values Jesus shared, then things shift for us, for others, and the world is a better place.