

## **Sermon: Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge**

Luke 18: 1-8

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Beware of the storyteller who tells you the ending first.

Personally, I have never been one to peek at the last pages of a novel, though that last Harry Potter book was a little bit of a temptation. Nor have I been one to search the house for my birthday or Christmas presents. When I am told to stay out of a closet because it contains some surprise, I stay out of it. I love a surprise, and I do everything I can to cooperate with surprises! So, beware the storyteller who tells you the ending right up front. Question their motives. Ask why they feel it necessary to control how you hear the story.

Case in point: Luke's parable of the widow and the judge. Luke inserts an editorial comment: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." My reaction to a story that starts like that is something like, "OK then! We know the ending, so why go any further?"

The thing is, that's not how parables work. Our summer sermon series might have already shown that. The last thing a parable usually does is to tell you the ending or the meaning right up front.

Parables are of a different sort of stories. All stories lie in the province of the imagination but parables are stories that allude to other realities, and do so in an imaginative way that leads to illumination, enlightenment ... but also to more questions, and sometimes, confusion.

It may be helpful to say what parables are not: parables are not analogies. There is never an easy correspondence between the characters in a parable and those in "real life." Though we might be tempted to say, for example, that the prodigal son 'represents' sinners, and the forgiving father 'represents' God, the parable resists any such easy answer, it's more multi-layered than that. Parables are deceptive in their simplicity. Yet when you start digging, the simplicity goes away, and some deeper meaning and truth become apparent.

As I read this short well-known parable, I instinctively know one thing; It is not about being rewarded by God for being persistent. It is not about the thinking that only if we pray hard and long enough, God will grant us what we want. This is not about nagging prayer or an unwilling God, but actually it is about a God who bears the suffering of people with them. I think I speak for most of us from Western Christian backgrounds when I say, "We would like to have all our problems fixed quickly." And maybe that is the main reason we pray at all; to give God a to-do list, and hope that God will get to our requests.

That is not what Jesus understood by prayer. Throughout his ministry, Jesus had been speaking about the suffering and confusion that was to take place within the lifetimes of many of his hearers. The coming of the Kingdom of God was going to be in the midst of tumultuous upheavals.

Luke continues, "Then Jesus told them a parable..." It is a strange story of a nagging widow that pesters a judge for justice against those who have wronged her. If we are honest, the story is almost inaccessible to us when we read it in 2012, for our context is so different from the one into which Jesus was speaking. We cannot comprehend what it was to be a widow in the time of Jesus. This was not a society where everyone was entitled to their day in court.

The irony of the story in its context is that the widow would have no rights and she certainly would not have access to a judge in a formal procedure of law. So her crying out for justice is in fact a parody.

A little background may be in order: "Women's behavior was extremely limited in ancient times, much as the women of Afghanistan during the Taliban oppression."

In Jesus day:

- Unmarried women were not allowed to leave the home of their father.
- Married women were not allowed to leave the home of their husband.
- They were normally restricted to roles of little or no authority.
- They could not testify in court.
- They could not appear in public venues.
- They were not allowed to talk to strangers.
- They had to be doubly veiled when they left their homes."

So, as a woman with no man to speak for her, she would have been walled behind her veil and widow's weeds. Effectively silenced, the very setup of this story Jesus is telling would have evoked interest and bemusement in his hearers. It was loaded with ironic fantasy. This woman can only cry out to the judge unofficially. Perhaps she calls to him as he passes her on his way to the city gates to judge the disputes and charges of the men for the day.

The cries of the woman eventually sway the cold heart of the judge who gives in to her request. A mistake many interpreters of this passage make is to miss the ironic subtlety of Jesus. This is not an encouragement to badger God with incessant "to-do" requests and requisitions.

The message I hear from Jesus is this, "If hard hearted judges can be moved to act, how much more will your God – your heavenly parent - be willing and eager always to help the children of God?"

Yet this is still not the main point of this parable. I say this, because the parable ends with Jesus asking, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Why should the Son of Man not find faith on earth? Perhaps there is doubt in Jesus' question because it is very difficult to keep praying in trust to a loving parent, when every circumstance of your life seems intractable and horrific. How do we keep trusting for "justice, liberation, wholeness, and cure" when there is no obvious way out?

It is here that the widow becomes our teacher. The widow had no rights. She in fact did not have access to the judge, but that did not cause her to become bitter, nor temper her trust. She kept right on calling, trusting despite all evidence to the contrary that there would be a breakthrough in her hopelessness.

How often do we hear of people who go through major life change only to discover that the new life they are living is not "IT"? But for all we know, "IT" is "IT", the "IT" being the constant unsatisfactoriness of life.

Buddhism calls this "dukkha", a difficult word to translate but a concept that points to the constant change in life, and that with that change we experience suffering, and loss, and stress.

Buddhist writings say, "Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, death is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair are dukkha; association with the unbeloved is dukkha; separation from the loved is dukkha; not getting what is wanted is dukkha."

I find this honesty of the Buddhists refreshing. "Suffering exists" is the first statement Buddhists make about reality. It is their first Noble Truth. Jesus is honest about the suffering of women and widows in his time.

The quick fix, romantic and utopian obsessions of our culture will always be tempted to expect our lives, our relationships, our work - with or without God - to be fulfilling, successful and to have positive outcomes. But if our life experiences teach us anything it is that this is not always so. Our life, our relationships, our work are not always rewarding and fruitful.

That does not mean that they, nor we, intend them to be so, but the "dukkha" of life somehow directs that the longed and worked for perfection does not always follow according to our schedule or theirs.

Yet despite all our experiences of suffering, stress and unsatisfactoriness we still cry out to our God and long with God that it could all be different. Somehow the calling helps. It helps even if nothing changes.

For my life, I have discovered that it is far more consoling to have a God who feels the pain with me and who longs for a better world than to have a MacGyver-God who fixes everything at my beck and call. A Mr Fixit God leaves me fickle and superficial. It would seem that, for Jesus, faith doesn't fix things as much as it gives the capacity and courage to bear the unbearable.

"This is IT!" Life isn't following the script that I wrote. Some situations are unworkable, stuck, and full of poignant, imperfect, suffering and stress. But I still trust that good things may come. I still have faith that in the end it will all be perfect or that I will see the perfection of the seemingly imperfect.

"Will the Son of Man find faith upon the earth?" As long as people who are immersed in dark nights of suffering dream, rather than despair, I believe he will. Amen.