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“Judge, NOT!” **Sermon on Luke 18:1-8**

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“Then the Master said, ‘Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won’t step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won’t he stick up for them? I assure you, he will.’”

(Luke 18:6-7, The Message)

A few years back, an artist drew a portrait of our daughter, Leah. We were at the beach or on the boardwalk and it’s a caricature. The head looks bigger and rounder, the nose is significantly larger, the smile is exaggerated. This is what caricatures are: overdrawn pictures that highlight some prominent features. Anybody who looks at Leah’s portrait will say, “Yes, that’s her!” It’s not – but it is. The artist has made her point.

Many of the parables of Luke function the same way. We hear him tell a story from Jesus. He draws our imaginations to the exaggerated features. Like the Jewish boy who hit bottom so low he was forced to slop the pigs, and the father who runs out to greet him before he can choke out a plea for forgiveness. Or the neighbor who pays for a stranger’s recovery from a beating, and the so-called religious folk that refuse to get involved. Or the accountant who discounts the accounts receivable after cheating his boss, and the boss who blesses him for it. These are tall tales that make their point.

Today we have a judge who has no time for God and neighbor, and a woman who nags him until he gives her what she wants. Neither is a good example. I wonder if that's why Jesus uses them.

Luke 18:1-8, Hear the Word of God:

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" The Word of the Lord...

By virtue of his position, the judge is responsible for justice. Clearly, he doesn't care for that. It's his job to listen to accounts of unfairness and then decide to do something about them. He's remarkably indifferent about the woman's case, whatever it is. She asks for justice, and he refuses. Not once, not twice, but repeatedly. I picture him in his black robe, enduring her complaints as he works on a crossword puzzle. He doesn't care about her, and not about anybody else either.

And the woman? She won't back down, back off, or back away. She's got her teeth in the matter like a pit bull and won't let go. We have no idea what has set her off. It's undisclosed and Jesus doesn't want us to be distracted by it. We can't question the validity of her case nor evaluate the crime against her. All we hear is her pounding the fist on the judge's desk, demanding, "Give me what I want!" The judge finally says, "If I don't do this, she's going to smash me in the eye."

It would be a comical scene if it weren't so dramatic. The judge who won't adjudicate. The woman who won't back down. The little bit I've heard about first-century justice in a Palestinian town, it's thoroughly believable.

And as my friend Bill Carter reminds us, "the story makes a point: the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Whoever complains the most will get the attention. Whoever honks the horn loudest will get the right of way. Or as a Chinese student declared in an ESL class, 'The baby that cries loudest will get the milk.'"¹ This is how the woman handles her complaint: "Give me what I want because I'm not going anywhere."

Many of you know that I grew up spending a lot of time in a courtroom. Pop was a judge. The year he was elected, when I was 10, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. Over the next three years of her surgeries and treatments she was in the hospital for long periods. During those years someone would drop me off at Pop's court and my after-school care was doing my

homework watching him up on the bench dispensing justice. Whenever I encounter the parable, I think, “Judge? NOT!” The judge in the parable is nothing like what I saw growing up.

Now, Luke tells us this is a parable about prayer. I don’t think he means to emphasize the obnoxiousness, but the persistence. Keep at it. Don’t stop praying. Never give in. Don’t lose heart. This is what Luke says, not Jesus. Jesus tells the story, but Luke tells us what he wants us to hear. Keep praying – that’s a good lesson; it stands on its own. Yet that sounds like he is merely skipping a rock across the pond. There’s more to the parable than that.

For one thing, this woman is a widow. That’s code language for someone who has not only lost her husband, but one who has no income, has no legal standing, has no community voice.² The Jewish commandments taught, “Pay attention to the needs of the widows, because the rest of the society is prone to overlook them.” Repeatedly the scriptures declared we are to care for the ones that nobody is paying attention to – like the widows, the orphans, and those without permanent residence status. They are passed over all too frequently. They are prone to be neglected and exploited.

So, the book of Deuteronomy thunders, “Cursed is the one who prevents the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow (27:19).” Thus, if this judge does withhold her plea, he truly has no regard for people or for God. That is a serious matter.

But listen to what the widow wants. In English, the request is, “Grant me justice!” In the original language, it says, “Grant me revenge.” Not merely a correction or a redress of her grievance. She wants her unidentified enemy to be punished. She wants him to suffer as she has suffered.

This little semantic detail, along with the judge’s literal concern that “if I don’t give her what she wants, she’s going to give me a black eye,” suggests her persistence is on the verge of retaliation.³ The word used is from boxing. If she can’t get revenge on her opponent, she will extract it on the judge. This gives the parable a different nuance, even a violent shade. It’s no longer a story only about persistence; it’s also about retribution and punishment that could go awry.

So even though the judge has little regard for people or the law of God, he is remarkably patient. He doesn’t hand out punishment at the first sound of her complaint. He waits. He handles some other cases. He gives the case some time to air out, allowing for further discovery and analysis of the facts.

It’s a good reminder that there’s a downside to the squeaky wheel, the noisy gong, and the clanging cymbal. And true justice must be true, not tainted or reactive.

At Princeton Theological Seminary we had a classmate by the name of Jim McClosky.⁴ He went to seminary as a second career student; at 37 his successful business career didn’t feel very meaningful. Like all of us, Jim was required to do a field education for a couple of years, so in his middle year, he did a year as a student chaplain at Trenton State Prison – New Jersey’s maximum-security prison – a few years before me. Joe Ravenell, the prison chaplain

and our supervisor, would sternly instruct us: “You’re there to listen and to pray, but don’t get entangled with any of the cases.”

Well, it turns out, Jim broke the rules. As he listened and prayed, he grew convinced that one of the guys on death row, Jorge De Los Santos, was falsely accused. Jorge begged for years for somebody to take the case but couldn’t afford a good attorney. So, Jim took a year’s leave of absence from the seminary, used his own money to investigate the case, found the chief witness against De Los Santos, who recanted his false trial testimony. Jim then hired a Hoboken lawyer to write a writ to bring the case back into court. A U.S. District Court overturned the conviction and in 1983 De Los Santos was freed. And, in the process, Jim McClosky found his calling.⁵ Jim finished seminary, but decided not to become a pastor, instead he founded Centurion Ministries and became the “father of the innocence movement.”⁶

I mention that, and lay it down beside the parable, because there’s an unusual phrase at the end that hasn’t been translated very well. Jesus speaks up to say, “Listen to this unjust judge,” who gave in finally. And he adds, “Won’t God give in, too, for his chosen ones who cry out day and night?” And then it says, “for God is longsuffering with them.” Longsuffering, patient, or resilient - it’s a term used specifically for God. That, too, adds another wrinkle to understanding the parable.

This parable is an example of what commentators call a “how much more” parable.⁷ Some scholars suggest that the parable says that if a widow with no standing can finally get justice out of a judge with no honor, “how much more” will God’s chosen ones have their pleas answered. Still others point to the widow’s persistence and believe it demonstrates “how much more” will God pursue us with his arms-wide-open mercy.

This parable reminds us that God is with us in the struggle. God is not reactive, anxious, or impulsive, not when it comes to addressing our serious problems. Our world is a mess. It’s always been a mess. It’s not getting worse. It’s always been bad. The good news is God is with us in the mess. The wheels of true justice are really grinding. Slowly, always slowly, but from the standpoint of eternity, we’re moving ahead.

The question – and it’s the last question that Jesus adds to the parable – is whether we trust God is going to make good on all the Lord’s promises.⁸ It’s a good question. It’s an honest question. From the standpoint of faith, it is already an answered question. It was answered well over a hundred years ago by a Presbyterian minister by the name of Maltbie Babcock. You might not know his name (that happens to people who died over a hundred years ago), but you may remember the third verse of a hymn that he wrote:

This is my Father’s world; O let me ne’er forget
That thought the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.
This is my Father’s world; Why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is king, let the heavens ring! God reigns; let earth be glad.⁹

And that leads us back to the matter of prayer, about praying always, and not losing heart. Prayer is more than mouthing off or bothering the Heavenly Judge. Prayer is sinking

deeply into the confidence that we are not responsible for fixing everything. That is God's mission, and we are blessed to take part.

We pray for peace, so we work for peace.

We pray for justice, so we engage in creating justice.

We pray for the hungry to be fed, so we feed them.

We pray for the homeless, so we find them warm shelter.

We pray for children to be safe, so we ensure their safety.

We pray for fools to become wise, so we do what we can to instruct them.

We pray for change, so we go out and protest.

We pray for our enemies to cease being our enemies, so we love them.

The point is, we must never pray for something that we are unwilling to work for. Our prayers must have more than wings; they must have hands, feet, and hearts. And that's why the life of faith is so interesting. It is truly a journey, a long-distance journey, as we wait for the justice of God to pour down like mighty waters. Thanks be to God who invites us to pray for and work for the kingdom to come on earth as it is on heaven. Amen.

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