

A Mouthy Woman and a God of Justice and Mercy

Luke 18:1-8

Here's my last Season of Grace sermon on Jesus' parables, a parable about prayer. When I chose this parable last Spring, I thought, "how nice to end with a sermon on prayer." Then I re-read it and studied about it, and whoa! It's about prayer alright, but about courageous, fist-shaking, world-rearranging prayer.

We first need to realize that Jesus is not comparing the judge in this parable to God, as if God needs to be worn down by our prayers until God finally listens and answers. Jesus is instead contrasting the judge to God.

Jesus describes the judge this way: he has no reverence for God nor respect for people. He doesn't need God. He's got a 2,000 denarii R.V. in his driveway, a gift from a wealthy donor—and free travel anywhere in the Roman empire. The justice and mercy of God have nothing to do with how he rules on cases.

Then there's the widow. A couple of months ago a man campaigning for Senate complained about what he called "mouthy women." I wonder why we don't have the expression, "mouthy men"? This week the Taliban passed a law forbidding women to speak or sing in public.

Another candidate for high office declared in an interview that helping raise grandchildren is “the whole purpose of the post-menopausal female.” This widow does not know her place! So the title of this sermon: “A Mouthy Women and the God of Justice and Mercy.”

I

Luke had domesticated the parable a bit, framing it as a general teaching about the importance of prayer, about praying always and not losing heart. We need that kind of teaching all the time, but this parable about prayer is hard-edged; it’s about the cry for justice, and it means business.

The core of the parable, perhaps the closest to its first telling by Jesus, is verses 2-5. Hear it again:

He said, in a certain city there was a judge who had no reverence for God or respect for people.

Reverence for God and respect for human beings go together. This judge has neither.

And in this city [Jesus goes on], there was a widow who kept showing up and saying to him: “Grant me justice against my opponent!”.

Now comes the judge’s interior monologue:

Though I have no fear of God nor respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me and driving me nuts, I will grant her justice so that she will not wear me out and give me a black eye!

Was he afraid she might show up one day, swing her purse and slam him in the face and literally give him a black eye? The Greek words used are boxing words.

If you were casting this parable as a movie, who would you get to play the widow? How about Bella Abzug, former member of the House of Representatives? Can't you see her in her big hat and purse? When she first ran for the House in 1971 her campaign slogan was, "A Woman's Place Is In The House!"

Or, the judge may have been afraid that the widow's constant public haranguing was giving him a proverbial black-eye in public, and election season was around the corner.

Now comes verse 6 which may have been Jesus' first application of the parable:

Listen to what the unjust says. And will not God give justice to his chosen ones who cry out day and night?

The answer, "Yes, God will!" And God doesn't need to be worn down to answer, we don't need to keep pounding on the door, God's ear is always inclined to us.

Well, what do you think about this parable so far?

II

Now let's take a look at widows in the Bible. They were among the most vulnerable of that society, those most likely to be victimized by others. As I've mentioned a time or two, the most oft repeated command in the Hebrew scriptures was to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. You find it in the Torah and Prophets and Psalms.

A widow's only social security after her husband died was a place in her husband's family. But that didn't always work out well. Widows could easily find themselves living in the streets, sometimes with her children.

But there's another picture of widows in Hebrew scriptures: widows as heroes. Think of Tamar, and Naomi and Ruth. They kept the lineage of Abraham and Israel going by their strength and faith and yes, wiles. They are in Jesus' family tree for that reason.

The widow in this parable was both. She had been wronged badly and she ferociously demanded the justice, vindication, the payback the law allowed.

And she was like our widow-heroes too, a feisty, tenacious persistent woman. We may remember my friend and former church member Senator Mitch McConnell's unfortunate words, trying to justify ruling Elizabeth Warren out of

order as she read Corretta Scott King's letter opposing the confirmation of Jeff Sessions as Attorney General.

McConnell said, "She was warned...nevertheless she persisted." You may have worn a T-shirt with those words: "Nevertheless, she persisted."

This widow was like that, and her plea for justice may also have been a plea on behalf of other widows too. This widow is the hero of the parable, and since Jesus' parables were mostly about the kingdom of God, think today of the *widow* as the kingdom of God! The kingdom of God that keeps coming and coming, knocking, making a nuisance of itself, keeps banging on doors until they open, and the kingdom of God comes *on earth* as in heaven.

III

The widow's story brought to mind an exhibit I saw years ago at the Museum of the New South in Charlotte. It told the story of the beginnings of what became the Brown vs. the Board of Education ruling by the Supreme Court in 1954, which mandated the desegregation of public schools across the land.

It was 1947 in Clarendon County, South Carolina. Black children walked up to nine miles to get to their "separate but equal" black schools. White children rode school buses to their nicely furnished white schools. Seventy-five percent of

the children in Clarendon County were black, but sixty percent of education dollars went to the white schools.

A black preacher named J.A. DeLaine took on the cause and found one man, Levi Pearson, who would join him in suing the school board to make them provide a school bus for black children. Levi Pearson's own daughter walked eight miles a day to school.

The judge in the case, much like the judge in our parable, dismissed the case on a technicality. That fall, Levi Pearson's credit was cut off by his fertilizer supplier, a white man.

But Pearson and Delaine could not be deterred. They visited a young lawyer in Columbia, South Carolina named Thurgood Marshall, who years later became the first African-American Justice of the Supreme Court. He said he would take the case if more plaintiffs joined the suit. They agreed on the goal of 100. By November of that year they had gathered 107 Clarendon County plaintiffs willing to sue for equal education in their county.

At the top of the petition form were the names of Harry and Eliza Briggs, whose home had become the place where people could come and sign the petition. The white people of the county began to put "the squeeze" on those who

had signed the petition. Harry Briggs lost his job at a gas station. His wife Eliza lost her job as a hotel maid.

Reverend DeLaine lost his teaching job, and both his house and his church were set aflame. A high-school student, Reverdy Wells, learned that his high-school transcript had been altered to include an “F” before it was sent to Temple University where he wanted to attend. His admission was denied.

But these people wouldn’t give up—they were a praying people—and their case went to the district court in Charleston, South Carolina. There they found an ally in a white judge named J. Waites Waring. The other two judges on the panel ruled against them, but Judge Waring wrote a dissent in which he said, “segregation in education can never produce equality.” That dissent later made possible an appeal to the Supreme Court, and its *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision led to the desegregation of public schools.

Judge Waring became an instant outcast in the white social circles of Charleston, and he eventually moved to New York. Prayer and action can prove costly. But look what happened where courage happened?!

IV

I hope this story inspires you as it did me. It reminds me so of the ministry of Jesus who proclaimed and embodied the justice and mercy of the kingdom of

God. He lifted up the poor and oppressed, those, Howard Thurman described, as those “with their backs against the wall.” He listened to women who came for healing and help—as in the story of the Canaanite woman who verbally jousting with Jesus until he healed her daughter.

John Dominic Crossan, as he studied the parables, said that *Jesus was the parable of God*. He is the clue and the key to unlocking the meaning of the parables. This one too.

V

Now to the end of this parable:

I tell you that God will soon grant justice to them. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

It’s a poignant question. Will he? And by “faith” we mean faith as *prayer*, prayer without ceasing, prayer as the cry for justice and the making of justice. In the 1960’s, Rabbi Abraham Heschel was teaching at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He left his classes and traveled to march with Martin Luther King from Selma to Montgomery. He was criticized for leaving his classes and his prayers. Rabbi Heschel answered his critics, “I felt my legs were praying”, and he quoted Psalm 35:10:

All my bones shall say,
 “O Lord, who is like you?
 You deliver the weak
 from those too strong for them,
 the weak and needy from those who despoil them!

Prayer is the center of our lives, and the center of this parable. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, one of my heroes and saints, has written profoundly on this topic in an essay, “Intercessory Prayer.” I’ve quoted him before to you on this. I do so again as a perfect commentary on this parable. Hear his luminous words as I pass the microphone to him:

We don’t think often enough of our intercessory prayer as a battle, but so it is—just as, at one level, the whole of prayer and spirituality is penetrated with warfare, with the struggle for freedom and vision. The prayer of intercession at its simplest is thinking of something or someone in the presence of God....*Then* it’s a struggle all right, the struggle not to let God and the world fall apart from each other: because that is the centre of this prayer, the recognition that, in spite of appearances, God and the world belong together. *There is no place where the love of God can’t go.*¹

Yes, God and the world belong together, and there is no place where the love of God, and justice of God, and mercy of God can’t go.

Don't give up your praying!

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1. "Intercessory Prayer", *Open to Judgement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), 138-9.