

God the Widow

Luke 18: 2-6

Jesus told parables to tease our minds into action. This one sure does! How we name a parable influences the way we read it. Some name this parable, The Parable of the Unjust Judge. We could just as well name it, the Parable of the Stubborn Woman. Both would be apt.

Often this parable is told to make one of two points. The first point comes from Luke's introduction to the parable: "He told them a parable so that they might learn to pray always and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Point number two comes from Jesus' words after the parable (v.6) about not giving up hope, for God will come and vindicate the righteous and correct injustice, even if it is delayed. Both are important lessons.

But, as last week, I want us to consider the parable without the introduction at the beginning and Jesus' application at the end. This may free our minds to hear it afresh and ponder its meaning for us today. Ready?

I

First line of the parable: "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people." Yes, he was an "unjust judge." We might call

him the “Un-Judge”. In Hebrew tradition judges were appointed to follow the laws of God as laid out in the Torah and to respect all people made in the image of God, and especially to look after the most vulnerable of the society, widows, orphans and strangers.

Next line: “And a widow was in that city, and she kept coming to him and saying ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’” Her “opponent” was taking advantage of her in her vulnerable state as a widow. To be sure she could not afford a high-priced lawyer, so she became her own lawyer, her own defender, and she would not give up! Over and over again she went to the judge and pled her case.

Third line: “For awhile he refused.” This judge who had no fear of God nor respect for people turned away from the woman’s appeals and her cry for justice. He ignored God’s command to care for the widow, orphan and stranger.

Line four: The judge now has a conversation with himself. He says: “Even though I have no fear of God and no respect for people, yet because the woman keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice. Otherwise, in the end she will batter me down.” Praise stubborn women!

We might have expected him to “come to himself” like the prodigal son and realize he was not fulfilling his sacred duty as a judge under God. But no, he

acceded to her incessant demands for justice because she had worn him down, and worn him out, and he just wanted her to go away!

He is certainly no model for us. *But she is!* A tenacious, persistent woman who would not give up on the justice she deserved, the justice promised her in a court which had been set up to defend people like her.

I think of Fannie Lou Hamer the great Civil Rights hero who was so savagely beaten in jail for her protests that she had life-long physical difficulties. But she famously said, "I'm sick and tire of being sick and tired." And facing death threats, she said, "If I fall, I'll fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom!" Praise tenacious, courageous, stubborn women.

You might remember the day in the U.S. Senate at the confirmation of Jeff Sessions to be Attorney General. Senator Elizabeth Warren was in opposition to his confirmation and was quoting Coretta Scott King. The Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, ruled her out of order. He famously said, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless she persisted." Like this widow! Like Harriet Tubman, like Rosa Parks, like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, like a million women through history who cried justice and worked for social change.

Line five: Jesus' application. No doubt Jesus told some his stories more than once, and he may have given different applications to serve the moment.

Here is the application Luke chose:

Now consider what this unjust judge said. How much more will God see justice done for his chosen ones if they keep calling on him day and night even though he delays to help them.

We can see in these words how these words would have been comforting to the early church Luke was writing for who were being persecuted and who were praying for Jesus to come again and bring in the kingdom in its fulness.

II

But that's not the only way to interpret this parable. The Spirit is at work to help us see meanings that are needful now in our lives.

Yes, we must be persistent in prayer, and yes, we can raise up the widow for her persistent demand for justice. And we can be encouraged that God is still at work to bring justice to those who cry justice, even if we sometimes cry with the Psalmist, "How long, O God!"

But I would like to offer a switch in roles in the parable for us today. It was given to me a few months ago in an article by Sam Wells, the vicar of St. Francis

in the Fields church in London. He was a decade or so ago the Dean of the Chapel of Duke University. I offer it to you. It turned a light bulb on in my brain.

He had addressed a conference on “Theology and Neurodiversity”, the first of its kind. Neurodiversity is a welcome new term to describe the full range of human neurodiversity in a way that honors those whose minds operate in a different key, to use a musical analogy. For example, those on the autism spectrum, or those whose brains process language in a different way than others.

We are all part of a neuro-diverse humanity. Nobody’s brain functions the same as another person’s brain. The term neuro-diversity can help us honor the diversity of the different ways our brains function. To welcome neuro-diverse persons is as important as welcoming other kinds of diversity, racial, or economic or theological, and maybe a new frontier for the church. Some of us pick up social cues better than others. Some people have engineer’s brains, other have poet’s brains. Some brains focus on the concrete, others on the abstract or symbolic. There are multiple intelligences: verbal, mathematical, musical, physical, visual, mechanical, and social and emotional intelligence too.

Paul was having trouble in one church locked in conflict over how to interpret scripture and who were the *real* Christians in the church. It’s still a problem. He said to both groups: “Welcome one another as Christ had welcomed you, for the glory of God (Romans 15:7)!” Jesus draws all children to himself.

We might even say that God is a neuro-diverse God, since God's mind, the Mind of the Maker, encompasses all our minds and understands all our minds.

III

So I was sailing along with the new way of thinking about God and neurodiversity when Sam Wells turned the tables on me, threw me a curve ball, did a switcheroo of roles. Try this on: *What if God in the parable is the widow and we are the unjust judge?*

God the Widow! God the Widow is the one continually coming before us pleading for justice and mercy. Justice and mercy for the poor, the neuro-diverse, the most vulnerable among us. The child denied access to the best education, Arnaud Arberry gunned down while jogging because he was black, Matthew Shepherd strapped to a post, tortured and killed because he was gay. The autistic child trying to make his way in a world that honors only one way of mental functioning. A woman denied promotion and advancement because of her gender. Those in low economic groups, of all races, who despair of rising out of poverty, barely keeping their heads above water. *God is the widow pleading for justice for all her children.*

So what will we do in our flowing judges' robes? Will we consider her case? She won't stop. If necessary she will wear us out and wear us down!

Here we are in our black robes and high seat. We are introduced to the court, and the court stands. We sit down, and here She comes! God the Widow.