

A Justice Postponed The Unjust Judge

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Text: Luke 18:2-5, Christian Bible

Theme: Justice has been a requirement for God's Domain since early times. Persistence in quest of justice is essential.

The author of the gospel of Luke has placed this parable within a section on prayer. The evangelists whether they completely understood the meaning of a parable or not, often used them to support their evangelistic themes, in this case persistent prayer.

Luke 18:1 He told them a parable about the need to pray at all times and never to lose heart. 2 This is what he said:

Once there was a judge in this town who neither feared God nor cared about people. 3 In that same town was a widow who kept coming to him and demanding: "Give me a ruling against the person I'm suing." 4 For a while he refused; but eventually he said to himself, "I'm not afraid of God and I don't care about people, 5 but this widow keeps pestering me. So I'm going to give her a favorable ruling, or else she'll keep coming back until she wears me down." (The Jesus Seminar voted this text pink. It sounds like Jesus.)

6 And the Lord said, "Don't you hear what that corrupt judge says? 7 Do you really think God won't hand out justice to his chosen ones—those who call on him day and night? Do you really think he'll put them off? 8 I'm telling you, he'll give them justice and give it quickly. Still, when the son of Adam comes, will he find trust on the earth?" SV (JS voted this part black.)

It is fairly obvious how the author of Luke fit this parable into the context of what he wanted to write about. All preachers do that. (You need to be on guard about me.)

I often begin a talk on a parable by stating at the very beginning, C.H. Dodd's definition of parable. To paraphrase and shorten; "Parables tease the mind into active thought." Robert Funk also had much that is useful to say about parables.

"In the beginning was the parable. The parable, for Jesus, was a window on the world: through that window Jesus looked out on familiar scenes—a harvest of grapes, dinner parties, mustard growing in a field, a woman baking bread—and saw these common realities in an entirely new light. For him, the logic of life had been radically revised. Jesus' parables and aphorisms are doors opening on to an alternate construal [image] of reality. The vista through those doors takes one back to the dawn of time, to chaos giving way to order. Parable is genesis. Parable is creation.

Jesus names this new logic God's imperial rule, or, in traditional language, the kingdom of God. In that realm, in God's domain, people and things do not behave in expected ways. In Jesus' imagined world, normal, everyday expectations are regularly frustrated."¹

We have before us a parable with two explicit characters, a judge and a widow. It seems pretty simple from our 21st century perspectives. If you nag enough, you will get your way. But parables need to be looked at with eyes and heard with ears of first century Jews. To them it would be a bit more complicated.

There are some implicit characters in this little play, the community and the traditions of Judaism. Everybody listening would have an understanding of what judges were to do and how judges were to act. Also they would know how, in the time of Roman occupation, much of the law and their traditions had been distorted.

There were traditional expectations about how a Jewish judge should conduct adjudication of issues and there was the common knowledge that often that process was corrupted by bribery, self-interest and alteration to fit Roman rule.

2 Chronicles 19:5-6

"He appointed judges in the land in all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, and said to the judges, "Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings but on the Lord's behalf; he is with you in giving judgment. Now, let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the LORD our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes." NRSV

As so often happens with people, the very definition of the virtuous commission becomes the antithesis. Judges in Jesus time were regarded as someone to befriend or bribe in order to get your case decided beneficially. The peasants and poor people listening to this parable would have a twofold concept of what judges were supposed to do according to Torah and what in reality they often did. As usual in a parable there are contrasts established. One of the contrasts is between how a judge is supposed to act and how the judge really acts.

The judge was in a town, of course, that is where we would find judges. That phrase places the judge in the urban elite group. He is a person with power. This judge is not like us listening to the story out here in rural Galilee. You all know how the well to do act. They play loose with rules that God has established. Then just to be sure everyone understands completely how bad this judge is, the phrase, "...who neither feared God nor cared about people." is added. This was not a good judge. We need not expect any justice from this judge. So, at this point of the parable, we can give up on the idea of seeing any justice.

A widow brings a case to the judge. All the folks listening to the parable knew widows, probably some listening were widows. Widows were special according to the law. Deuteronomy 10:17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

And: Isaiah 1:17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. NRSV

In this culture, "Many widows and their children were left destitute. So common was this state of affairs that "widow" came to mean not simply a woman whose husband was dead but also one who had no means of financial support and thus needed special protection."²

Deuteronomy 27:19 "Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice."

"The widow need not be regarded as an old woman. The result of the early marriageable age (between 13 and 14 for girls) was that widows were frequently quite young. Since the widow brings her case to a single judge, and not before a tribunal, it would appear to be a money-matter: a debt, a pledge, or a portion of an inheritance is being withheld from her."³

The widow is not in the same social class as the judge, he is an insider, she is an outsider. In the honor/shame society in which they live, he is honored because of his position as a judge, she is shamed since she is a poor widow, further examples of contrasts.

The responsibility of the judge was to be honest and fair in all cases but to especially look out for the concerns of the oppressed; orphans, widows and the strangers among them, people who had no one to plead their cases, folks with no advocates. Many widows were cheated out of their inheritances and were left to starve to death since they had no one to provide for them.

So we have the confrontation, a judge who is supposed to always be just and an advocate for the widow but who is not just and is actually evil and a widow who is supposed to be protected and helped by the judge but is rejected. We see a clash between a powerful man and a woman who appears to be powerless and we expect the woman to just go away and probably later die of starvation. But the widow does not go away. She comes again and again. The Greek language used to explain the interaction between the judge and the widow is the language of boxing. It is possible to read the text and find the judge saying, "This woman will give me a black eye." This is one feisty widow.

"[T]he widow's request is not granted because she is virtuous nor because her cause is just, nor is it granted because the judge is impartial and objective. Rather she simply wears him down from her relentless coming. As in the case of the master in the Dishonest Steward, the judge's response runs counter to expected behavior."⁴

Imagine that in a parable, unexpected behavior. We expect justice, we don't get justice because the judge is unjust. So we acknowledge that, yes, justice often eludes us, especially justice for the poor and the oppressed. Then we get twisted around again because justice is fulfilled and not for any just reason but because of

continual pleading by the widow. The judge does not come to his senses and realize his responsibilities to justice or to do what God requires. An angel does not visit the judge with a word from God. There is no burning bush. Our expectation of God acting to save the widow in some powerful way is not fulfilled. The widow just wears down the judge until he does what she wants. In God's domain, justice comes in odd ways, not by a direct and apparent action of God.

Brandon Scott takes this position on the results, "The three parables that cluster around the theme of the city and beyond—Two Men Went Up to the Temple, From Jerusalem to Jericho, and In a City There Was a Judge—test that part of the social religious map where boundaries indicate who is inside and who outside. The judge, the priest and Levite, and the Pharisee are inside. The widow, the Samaritan, and the tax collector are outside. In this parable the outsider functions differently from the way it does in the other two parables. In those parables the outsider is a sinner; here the widow is one in need. Her being outside results from her social status. Yet as in the other two parables, here too the outsider is the bearer for the kingdom. A hearer of the parable discovers the kingdom under the guise not of a just judge but of a pestering widow who exposes her own shamelessness in continually pressing her cause on a dishonorable judge."⁵ In this case, justice comes from an unexpected and very earthly source rather than from "On High".

So, is this parable about continually pleading our case until we win as Brandon Scott has said, shamelessness triumphs over evil? Is it about persistent prayer as the author of Luke concludes? Or have we grasped it yet? There are other explanations.

Neal Fisher says this story is about the kingdom of God. "Thus we glimpse the New Age when we see one who is powerless persisting until she receives justice. The New Age is vindication of the oppressed. It is glimpsed when the oppressed get justice, even when they have to take it from an unwilling and an unjust judge."⁶ It might be a picture of the ways things will be in some future "better world."

From many commentators we get explanations that indicate God works through the unusual circumstances of this parable to bring about justice, an apocalyptic type of ending, the good succeed, the bad lose. Others suggest that in the empire of God all issues will work out for the good of all. If you hold either view, that is fine. But there is a subtly different view. There is no God figure obviously present to save the day. Perhaps the law, the Torah, could be seen as a presence working behind the scenes to bring about God's justice. The experiences of Jesus followers reminds them that things do not always work out for the best despite what they might believe about this new empire Jesus keeps talking about. Jesus' audience knew there was a great deal of injustice around. Perhaps the key issue here is the necessary and persistent pursuit of justice.

Just as we do, the original audience of the storyteller would all have slightly different ideas and perspectives about what they heard. It is okay for us to have different ideas. Bob Funk has said about these types of parables, "In God's domain, help is perpetually a surprise."⁷

We do not know if the widow's case was just, she could have been mistaken. The story doesn't say. But she got justice by persevering. She continually sought justice again and again until she wore out the judge. She got justice from a dishonest judge. She knew he was dishonest but for her, justice was worth the effort. So I think a question we can ask ourselves is, "Is justice worth the effort?"

Parables do this to us again and again. They start off being nice little stories about other people that may have some moral value for us but they always end up blindsiding us. We laugh at the feisty widow giving the well to do dishonest judge a hard time, knocking him about in the boxing ring, but there comes the point when we have to ask ourselves about justice issues and our part in supporting them.

The orphan, the widow and the alien among us are still justice issues today, even though we have Children's Services, Social Security and the INS. But there is more to justice than just these issues from Hebrew Bible times.

Equitable education opportunities for all people, support for agricultural success in poor countries, erasing stigma from mentally ill friends and family members, supporting equal rights for gay and lesbians and for their committed relationships, honorable living conditions for homeless folks, major concerns for the environment and the organisms we share space with, protection of our incarcerated enemies from civil rights violations by our government and the list goes on and on. Social issues, justice issues, we all have our pet justice projects and concerns. Is justice worth the effort?

What glimpse of a re-imagined world do you get from this parable? In God's domain, if we want to see justice done we are the ones to make it happen. We cannot wait for the power structures to act. We cannot wait for God to act in some powerful way. We can act as initiators of justice. We can be persistent in seeking justice. But do we have the strength to be like the widow, going again and again to the powers that be, even if they are corrupt, making sure that those on the inside of the power structure do not neglect those on the outside. While she appears to be concerned only for herself and her legal issue, she is a symbol of outsiders who need to be protected by a just society. Is justice worth the effort?

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¹ Funk, Robert, Honest to Jesus, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p.165

² Scott, Bernard Brandon, Hear Then the Parable, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989 p.180

³ Jeremias, Joachim, The Parables of Jesus, London, SCM Press LTD, 1963 p.153

⁴ The Jesus Seminar, Robert Funk, Bernard Brandon Scott, and James R. Butts, The Parables of Jesus, Sonoma, CA, Polebridge Press, 1988, p.41

⁵ Scott, p.187

⁶ Fisher, Neal, The Parables of Jesus, Glimpses of the New Age, Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1979, p.103

⁷ Funk, p.180