

Year C, Proper 24  
Jeremiah 31:27-34  
Psalm 119:97-104  
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5  
Luke 18:1-8

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

This morning's parable, often called "the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge," is only found in the gospel of Luke. Somehow that's not really surprising, though, because it uses humor and irony to get its point across, and Luke is the only gospel writer who seems to like to do this. Just like in the story of the friend who refuses to get up in the middle of the night to help his neighbor, and the parable of the unjust manager, in this story Luke is having Jesus tell us what God is NOT like, and making us chuckle, in order to teach us what we should be doing.

Luke tells us explicitly what this parable is about, unlike some of the others: it's "a parable about their [the disciples'] need to pray always and not to lose heart." Then he launches into his story, which, again, shows us how God is *not*. This judge "neither fears God, nor has respect for people," and the widow demands justice from him. Then, as now, there were people in positions of power who used that power to dominate and abuse others. By using a judge who is explicitly evil, Luke makes it clear that the judge is not representing God in this story. And the widow would have been a more identifiably weak and vulnerable character to Luke's original listeners, because remember that a woman was generally either the property of her father or her husband in this culture. Once her husband dies, she has no mandatory supporter; family members like a son or a brother often would take a widow in after the death of her husband, but without that support a widow could be reduced to the status of a beggar.

The widow wants justice against her opponent, and the judge refuses to give it to her. We don't know what the case consists of, or why the judge won't give her justice (except that he's a despicable person), but the widow "kept coming to him" about her situation and wouldn't give up. Again, we all know people who are like this; once they get the bit between their teeth, they simply do not stop. The humor of the vulnerable, but tenacious underdog continually harassing the powerful, but contemptible authority figure is one that has been popular since before the story of David and Goliath, and we still see today. The humor is made still greater when the judge admits to himself, "though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." And it's even funnier in the Greek, because Luke uses a boxing metaphor, literally saying, "so that she may not hit me under the eye."

All of this humor is by way of saying that God will grant us justice, that God hears us as we cry out, **much** more than even the unjust judge hears this widow. To emphasize this, Jesus then uses another literary device: rhetorical questions—

questions whose answers are so obvious that they don't need to be answered. "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" The answer is obviously YES, God will grant them justice. "Will he delay long in helping them?" The answer is clearly NO, God will not delay. And to make it absolutely clear, Jesus then says explicitly, "I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them."

I imagine some people are hearing this, and thinking, "well, I can think of lots of times when justice was not done—when evil was triumphant, and justice was even trampled underfoot. How is it that this is an accurate portrayal of what happens when we pray for justice? The early Christians probably wondered about this, too, as they were rounded up and executed, or put into the arena to provide sport for their pagan overlords. But as Luke exhorts them in his second letter to Timothy, they (and we) should pray, and tell about Jesus and "be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching." People who fought for justice, like Abraham Lincoln, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu can tell us about patience and perseverance. We should be persistent and patient in our praying and in living what Jesus taught us because God listens, and God is always with us.

God listens, God loves, and God is always present. God is not a fairy godmother who grants our wishes, or an indulgent grandfather who rewards us when we are good. We cannot earn any of this, and it isn't magic. God is more like a loving parent, but one who is always with us, always listening, enabling us to endure, giving us strength and resilience to live our lives, to love one another, and to make just decisions. People sometimes ask "why should we pray, if we don't get what we want from praying?" But Prayer is more than asking for, and getting what we want. It's about being in relationship with, and conversation with God. It's about letting God inform and shape who you are. It's about participating with God in bringing about the kingdom. And we need to be persistent in doing *that*. Because it will come. As Dr. Martin Luther King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Amen.

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