

October 20, 2019

Luke 18:1-8

I have known this parable since I was a teenager. When I first encountered it again preparing for this sermon, I was at a real loss. I have no problem with the widow speaking up and demanding justice. That fits my progressive theology to a T. But what was I to do with an unjust judge?

I struggled, because I am so trained to see the authority figure in Jesus' parables as representing God. Whether it is the vineyard owner or the prodigal son's father or the king on the throne separating the sheep and the goats, the authority figure is God. So in this parable, the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge, why is God being unjust?

Being troubled by all this, I read a number of different commentaries. One was particularly helpful in helping me see the widow in a new light. In fact, two things stood out for me. First my image of the widow. I pictured this elderly, small, frail, slow moving, weak woman, getting herself out of her dwelling with difficulty, traipsing down to the courthouse, and with as much energy as she could muster demanding justice from the unfeeling, unjust judge.

This image got tossed out by the second thing I learned: How the judge experienced the widow's demands. In the NRSV translation the judge says, "Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." In The Message Bible translation his words are even more revealing, "But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice – otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black and blue by her pounding."

The NRSV translates a Greek verb in this passage as "bothering"; The Message Bible translates the same verb as

"badgering". The commentator I read said that the only other place in the Greek New Testament this verb is used is in one of Paul's letters where it is translated as "boxing" (as in the sport of). The Message Bible's verb "badgering" is expanded upon by the image of the judge being "beaten black and blue by her pounding." The NRSV is a little tamer with "wear me out by continually coming."

The widow is not the small, frail, weak old lady I had originally imagined. She was, in fact, able bodied enough to physically challenge the judge.

While this is a very interesting twist to my view of the widow, I was still left with God, the unjust judge. My prejudice, my belief in who God is, would not allow me to envision a need to beat God "black and blue" in order to move God from unjust decisions and actions to just decisions and acts. What is this parable about?

It was mid-week, when re-reading the passage that I was struck by the why Jesus was telling the parable. All these years, the many times I had read it, the introduction to the parable never really reached my understanding. "Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit."

"Pray consistently and never quit." The focus of this parable is not the widow. It is not the judge. It is prayer. It is a call "to pray consistently and never quit." Seeing this allowed me to let God off the hook. The unjust judge is not God. But now I have a new problem. What does prayer look like?

When I was growing up, prayer was talking to God. For years I have shared with people the acronym A.C.T.S., which stands for the four types of prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication, with

Supplication having two types: petition – asking God for something I want, and intercession – asking God to help someone else. That was what the church I grew up in said was prayer.

In recent years progressive Christianity has learned from other faith traditions and reached back within its own faith history to early church and mystic traditions and added various forms of meditation in answer to the question of what prayer looks like.

For me this week, my image of what prayer looks like got challenged. It seems the traditional A.C.T.S. view of prayer and the addition of meditation to the definition are still limiting how Jesus understood or viewed prayer. Jesus is saying the widow's consistent persistent challenge to an unjust system is also a form of prayer.

Wow, so does that mean all those times I joined the crowd to protest an injustice I was praying without knowing it? If not, what kind of physical protest would Jesus consider prayer? The operative words to our being able to answer this question is “to pray consistently” or “to pray always”. This leads to another question, what is “consistent prayer” or “to pray without ceasing”?

What came to me, as I reflected on this question is that the justice we seek must be the justice we are willing to live out in our own lives. It is not enough to protest for peace and then speak words of hate toward someone we don't like or don't agree with. Or, if we clamor for clean air and water, if we want a clean environment, then we must be willing to put in the effort at recycling. When we are fearful of global warming and demand our legislators do something about it, but are unwilling to lower our thermostats or carpool or in a

myriad of other ways reduce our carbon footprint, then our demands for justice are not consistent prayers.

Perhaps demanding justice as a prayer could be known as a “living prayer”; perhaps “to pray consistently”, “to pray always” is to live my prayer, make it a part of me. As good as this sounds, it does have a down side. Jesus is not promising a rose garden here. The widow brings strength and courage and persistence here; she brings it with a passion. And, if we are to believe the Greek verb, she uses her whole body in the prayer; it is physical; the judge fears becoming “black and blue by her pounding.”

There is injustice in the world, always has been, always will be. Jesus is calling us to demand justice wherever we are, with our whole being. He is challenging us to see this as prayer, as a way to communicate and connect with God and our neighbor.

Demanding justice is a holy undertaking, but just because you make it an act of faith does not mean justice will be given overnight. One must be persistent over the long haul.

As I wrote this, an example of demanding justice as persistent prayer, prayed consistently over a long period came to my mind: Our denomination's 20-year push for marriage equality, using the “prayer” “never place a period, where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.” This was a prayer, prayed consistently again and again and again, with our whole being, demanding justice, and our prayer was answered.

Both individually and as a church Jesus calls us to pray consistently for the just treatment of all God's creation. My God give us the faith, courage, and stamina we need to pray consistently demanding justice each and every day. Amen.