

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Gospel passage from Luke includes two parables, but the lectionary authors' choice was to feature only the first of the two for this Sunday. That parable is known as either *The Unjust Judge* or *The Persistent Widow*, depending on the perspective of the writer and his or her focus on the judge or the supplicant. In some sense, the judge here represents God, but we need to be careful with parables, because the characters in them do not always line up nicely with the person represented. God is surely the ultimate judge, but *our God* is not cranky, mean-spirited, or spiteful. He is loving and merciful. Thus, as long as we recognize that this is *a very flawed view* of God, the judge can function that way in the story.

To some extent, the message of the parable is fairly obvious, but the mind of Jesus was always characterized by complexity, so despite initial appearances, his story-telling actually embraces involved situations and multi-dimensional characters. Take the word *vindication* for example, which figures prominently here; it deserves some commentary. It actually conveys a rather simple reality: the outcome of a legal proceeding. In other words, the person charged or the one bringing suit will receive a verdict from the court. Whichever side is upheld in the courtroom is the *vindicated* or *justified* party. I mention this because when St. Paul uses the term justification, we often try to make complicated something which is actually rather simple. And the simpler definition is the one that best conveys the original meaning.

One way to consider how this legal concept affects the story is to view God's people as the litigants in a lawsuit, waiting for God's verdict. The lawsuit is about "the renewed Israel (that is, the Israel of the New Testament) --- that renewed nation gathered around Jesus, awaiting from God the vindication that will come when those who have opposed his message are routed."

The point of the parable, then, is described best by the category in which it falls: the "*how much more*" variety of parable, and there's an entire group of parables that fall within this classification. Here's how it works: "if even a rotten judge like (the one pictured here) can

be persuaded to do the right thing by someone who pesters him day and night until it happens, then of course God, who is justice itself, and who cares passionately about people, will vindicate them, will see that justice is done.”

That is, if the rotten judge can act in a righteous way, how much more will not God care about his people and vindicate them? And this message is directed to the disciples themselves, not a general audience.

Luke’s interest here is in how we approach God: not prayer in general but rather praying and not becoming weary when considering how long it might take for deliverance to come. The disciples are being told to go on praying even when they think God is not listening or is ignoring them. They should go on praying “thy kingdom come” and persist in doing so even when it seems pointless.

Luke’s Jesus is urging prayerful and faithful living in the certainty that God will act; it’s just that the action will occur in God’s time, not ours. We do not reckon time in the way God does.

If you think about it, this is precisely how people build and retain faith. And, in turn, how we do that tells us something about the character of God. He is merciful, patient, and eager to assist his people. What is the evidence of our faithfulness? It is prayer and constant involvement with God as we interpret and deal with the world we occupy. And the waiting we are counseled to persist in includes self-examination.

The story is “directed especially toward people who easily regard themselves as faithful followers.” The judge “is a negative example to reveal, by contrast, the unqualified mercy and justice of God.” It is persistence that ultimately moves him, not mercy or justice. The woman is vindicated, then, largely because she was a nuisance.

The story is telling us that “the good of prayer is not dependent upon the outcome” (as in a legal dispute). It does not necessarily change things, but “one continues to pray and in the act of prayer itself something is given to the one who prays.” Thus, prayer itself is what is vindicated here. We are reminded that “God is always *for* God’s people. God is the one who can be trusted far more than any human relationship can be trusted.”

This parable is unique to Luke's gospel. Luke has a greater focus on prayer than is found in any of the other gospels. In that connection, this parable may be an answer to the question raised by the Pharisees: *When is the kingdom of God coming?* In the parable, the question would be phrased as "when will this widow receive justice?"

Jesus tends to answer the Pharisees' question by saying that the kingdom is "both *present* in (one's) life" and "*yet to be revealed* in public for all to see" in a kind of paradox of Christian reality. In the parable, then, we look to the example of the woman who does not lose heart.

There is another dimension here as well, and it has to do with social justice. The widow would have been "vulnerable to being taken advantage of...easy prey to those who would take advantage of her financial straits and her physical vulnerability." The parable, then, commends persistent prayer and action "on behalf of God's justice." In addition, Luke is raising the question: "will the faithful and prayerful *continue* to advocate for (justice) until the *parousia* (or the return of the Son of Man in the Second Coming)?" This was a question which played a large role in the thinking of the early church.

Another interesting possibility for interpretation emphasizes the setting of the time when Luke's gospel was being composed. It is now pretty much agreed that whatever the original meaning of the parable, by the time it was included, it definitely focused on the *Parousia* or Second Coming of Christ. This changes the focus a bit and encourages us to look to whatever it was that was of particular interest to Luke's audience. It could be giving voice to "some of the discouragement of early believers, whether caused by the delay of Jesus' return or the difficult or unjust circumstances (these people) were experiencing. If this is the case, the parable is saying: "while I know that God may seem like an unjust judge, God's actions are just and God will deliver justice in due time." Alternatively, the focus here is more on comfort for those in distress and encouragement to persevere in faith and prayer."

Finally, "in addition to being vulnerable, widows also appear (in the Bible) as prophetic, active and faithful." There are many examples in scripture. Here she is "persistent, active and forceful enough to get the justice she demands even from an utterly corrupt unjust judge." Thus, her persistent pestering here is largely identified with an image of, and lesson in, prayer." Toward the end of the passage, a question arises which takes us into the future:

“And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” is the question. It is possible to link this story with others in the gospels to begin to answer that question.

The Son of Man will find faith, but it may be in unexpected places...not among the religious professionals or the ones certain of their own righteousness, but if not in them, to whom would we look? Well, perhaps among outsiders, the unlovely, the unclear, the ones certain of their sinfulness.”

In addition to persistence in prayer, it is no doubt equally critical to identify what it is that we will be praying for: “daily bread, the Holy Spirit, the kingdom, justice” or something unknown at this point.

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

AMEN

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