

October 20, 2019 Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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GOSPEL

Luke 18:1-8

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the eighteenth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ ” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Another day with Jesus. Another parable.

This is his 20th parable in Luke’s gospel, for anyone counting at home.

So far we’ve had...you ready...?

- The two debtors
- The lamp under a bushel
- The Samaritan neighbor
- The friend at night
- The rich fool
- The wise and foolish builders
- The new wine in old wineskins

- The parable of the strong man
- The sower
- The barren fig tree
- The mustard seed
- The leaven
- Counting the cost
- The lost sheep
- The lost coin
- The prodigal father and the lost son
- The unjust steward
- The rich man and Lazarus
- The master and the servant
- And today...the unjust judge

(And there are seven left for a grand total of 27 in Luke.

And just in case this helps anyone out on Jeopardy someday –

Mark has 9. Matthew has 22.

And John...anybody got a guess...?

None. John does not tell parables of Jesus.)

If you combine them all together and account for the overlap...there are 37.

37 puzzling, shifting, perplexing stories

meant to open our imagination

about what the kin-dom of heaven might really be like...

He's not the straightest of shooters sometimes, that Jesus.

We could take this parable we hear today as a simple lesson

about being persistent in prayer...

about trusting God's timing more than our own...

even when it feels like we are banging on a locked door
in the middle of the night.

But I don't think there's only one simple moral lesson

to be gleaned from a parable –

this one included.

Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber once said (and I remind myself of it often)
that “reading parables as advice for how to behave
is like using riddles to get directions to the airport.”

So yes...we are called to pray persistently...
to work persistently in the face of injustice...
and to trust that our God is better than the unjust judge...
even when justice seems delayed and denied.

We are called to trust that God joins us in yearning
and also working to bring justice and love into the world...

And if this widow’s persistence is to be our model...

Well I’m not sure that we hear the full extent of this woman’s persistence
in the language that we have accessible to us.

We hear the unjust judge say in his annoyed half awake resignation...
that he will give the widow what she demands
so that she will not “wear him out by continually coming.”

That’s not what the Greek says...

The verb translated “wear me out” literally means “give me a black eye.”

You gotta love a language that has a verb just for that.

It’s a boxing metaphor.

He’s calling this woman a boxer...an MMA fighter...

She’s not just begging and pleading. She’s ready to throw punches.

Sometimes that’s all the recourse you feel you have left.

This widow is someone the judge is obligated to help.

She is vulnerable.

The laws of her land were written to make sure she would be safe...
protected in her vulnerability.

So her indignation may be justified.

But there is also another tinge to the Greek...
that draws her in even sharper relief.

The justice she is asking for could also be called “vengeance”...or “punishment.”

She is angry, and she is asking for revenge.

She wants her enemy to suffer.

And she’s come fixing for a fight.

She’s Indigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*...

so completely devoted to revenge she’s lost herself, maybe.

And while most of us haven’t rehearsed an introduction we intend to make before dueling our father’s murderer to the death...

we might be more familiar than we’d like to admit

with the delight we can take

when we see someone who has hurt us suffering.

So, is this just a parable of contrast, then?

Instead of an unjust judge,

we have the most just and righteous judge of all in our God...

and instead of being angry, violent seekers of vengeance...

we should put down our weapons and pursue gentle justice

as the people of that God?

Swords into ploughshares and whatnot?

It is a lovely vision...

but anyone who has spent even a day trying live a ploughshare life

in a world full of sharp objects knows how hard it is to persist...

though we have seen glimpses of the kingdom from some who have.

The widow in this parable reminds me (in the best way) of Leymah Gbowee – whose memoir our church book group read recently.

She organized the women of Liberia to protest for peace during their civil war.

For months they gathered in public, dressed in white...

making them even easier targets,

surrounded as they were by Charles Taylor’s guns.

She pursued the leaders who were playing games with the lives of her people into neighboring Ghana

where they were holding fruitless token peace talks
and staged a sit in to hold power accountable
to actually make peace instead of just enjoying their lovely hotel
while the people of Liberia were dying.

Or Wangari Maathai, of Kenya....

who fought for environmental protections and rights for women
in post-colonial Kenya against untold numbers of obstacles.

Or Sojourner Truth...

who literally stood before a judge in the criminal justice system
of a United States that allowed people to own other people...
and argued for her son to be released from enslavement to rejoin his family,
now living in freedom.

And she won.

Or Elizabeth Eckford and Ruby Bridges

or any of the many, many other persistent pioneers of desegregation.

But even in the face of such inspiring examples...

the forces of injustice and suffering are sometimes larger
than our ability to persist.

They are overwhelming...

and we are not always the towering heroes we think the world needs.

Maybe we can't be as persistent as Leymah, Wangari,

Sojourner, Elizabeth and Ruby...

Maybe we don't have the tenacity of the widow in this parable.

So if it's today is about a simple morality tale of any stripe...

we may still not find much hope there.

I don't know what you see as the difference

between you and the people we would call heroes.

But when I think of the stories of the women
who remind me of the persistence of the widow
in the face of the world's indifference and injustice...
I am reminded that we are each of us made in the image of God...
and sometimes it shines out in particularly powerful ways
in particular people.

We are made in the image of the God who gave us life and breath...
and who pursued us with the promise of life in the garden...but we left...
and who pursued us further offering us life beyond Eden...and we failed...
and who pursued us again by renewing the earth
and offering it fresh to Noah and his family...who still stumbled,
even though they were the best people to be found...
and who led us across the desert...and freed us from Egypt...
and who led us into the Promised Land
and even when we were unfaithful...
persisted in coming to to save us.

We are made in the image of the God who takes on full human life
in the person of Jesus of Nazareth...
who leads his followers and teaches and heals, and calls out for justice...
and is still rejected by the powers of the world
that lead him to the cross and death...
and he pursues us still...
even breaking the power of death
to show us that he will never stop pounding on any locked door
that keeps us from him.

If God is anywhere in this parable, God is the widow...
just like God is a woman with a broom
sweeping up every last piece of dust and debris
in the far flung corners of her house to find us...
just like God is a shepherd who won't give up
on even one of the silly stubborn sheep...
just like God is a sower who wastefully throws seeds all over the place

instead of sensibly putting them where they are expected to grow...
just like God is a parent who runs like a undignified goofball
when they see their lost child coming down the road to home.

God, it seems, shows up...
in the invisible ones...
the impractical ones...
the wasteful ones...
the embarrassing ones...
and the obnoxious ones.

And we are made in the image of God...
encouraged to take heart in the face of evil...
because that unrealistically persistent,
embarrassingly loving,
tenaciously extravagant one is alive in our lives...
is at work in our spirits...
and is taking the third shift when we are exhausted...
to demand that love and justice be granted...
even by the powers that don't give them up easily...

And God will outlast every single thing that tries to hide behind a locked
door...
even when it's us.

Trust and believe.
God is not going anywhere until God has built the kingdom
and gathered the children
and liberated the captives
and comforted the grieving
and brought justice to the oppressed.

May you find strength to persist in knowing
that God will never give up on you...
or anyone in this whole broken world God loves so much.

Thanks be to God. Amen.