

## **"Persistence in Faith"**

Luke 18:1-8

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### **Scene 1 – The widow begs for justice**

Luke is the only Gospel with what has been called "The parable of the unjust judge." But there are two characters in this parable. The judge.

And the woman begging for justice. She not Erin T. Brockovich. She is the homeless person in tattered clothes under the bridge, who holds up a sign that says God bless. She is the poor mother of the Guatemalan child with clubbed feet. She is the mother of the runny nosed child with ADD who wants to learn, but cannot by conventional means. She is the woman with cancer pain.

Had the widow in today's parable been a ballplayer, she would have been called out on strikes even before she even got to swing.

Strike one: she's a woman. In the Biblical world where women were expected to know their place, but she has too much chutzpah. Strike two: she is a widow. Any status she might have had disappeared with the death of her husband. Like any other woman in Jesus' time she had no one to intercede for her in the decision of the judge. And, strike three, she is poor. Her umpire is one who "neither feared God nor had respect for people." He was probably motivated by money and she had none to offer.

It has never been easy being a woman, but it is a picnic today compared to the world in which Jesus lived. Women had few legal rights, and if a woman lost her husband, and she did not have other family members to turn to for support, her plight was dire indeed. There was no welfare system, no social security, and precious few ways for a woman in distress to earn a living.

There is a story of two twelve-year-old boys, Bob and Mike, who broke a window while playing baseball. They looked around to see if anyone had seen them. No one was in sight, except for Mike's little brother. They went over and offered him a piece of candy not to tell. He refused it. "I'll give you my baseball," Mike said. "No," said his little brother. "Then what about my new glove?" Bob added. "No!" said the little brother. "Well, what do you want?" they pleaded. With resoluteness, the little fellow said, "I wanna tell."

It's hard to negotiate with little brothers sometimes. But it is even harder to negotiate with a burned out judge.

Jesus tells us this judge neither fears God nor respects people. Lest we be confused, this judge is not God. His is a closed universe. This judge always has it

figured out. He leaves no room for the possibility that God may have a more creative answer to questions that life presses upon him. But the judge is also not evil.

Do we know anyone who matches this description? Sure we do! Each of us fits that description sometimes, and some of us may make a career of doing so. There are those times, all too often, when each of us lives entirely unto ourselves. We refuse to allow that God may have a creative solution to problems that beset us, that God may offer us better things than we can ask for or imagine. Our decisions about life leave no room for God, and no room for other people who have needs and wishes different from our own. The universe, as we understand it, becomes very small. We become its sole inhabitants. This judge could be one of us, or part of us, when we are tired at the end of the day. When we are burned out at the office or at home.

Who does the loud-mouthed woman represent? Could it be that this poor and powerless woman, who demonstrates unlimited *chutzpah*, is a reminder of God?

This fits the parable. God is ever attempting to break into our closed universe, to draw us into relationship, to make us recognize what our relationships with God and neighbor demand of us.

If God is not the unjust judge, could God be the widow who wears him down? So where, again, is the unjust judge to be found? Listen carefully: the unjust judge is inside each of us, and perhaps the purpose of our prayer is to wear this part of us down, to wear this part of us out, to force this part of us to do justice. Prayer is the widow's voice, strident yet sane, insisting that things could be different.

This burned out judge could be part of us. But even the hard hearted sometimes listen.

## **Scene 2 – The judge grants justice**

One of my good friends tells me I do not know how to take no for an answer. I am not sure if she meant that as a compliment or a constructive criticism.

My epitaph will probably say: "Mike has finally gone to rest. He now reclines on Abraham's breast. Peace at last for Mike, but not for Father Abraham!!!"

This week I called an insurance company. One of my cancer patients needed a narcotic, and they only pay for a certain amount each month. After waiting on hold and speaking to four different people, I finally got to the right person in the company, the one who could make decisions. And he quoted the company policy. I told him that I understood the policy, and the reasons. To avoid unnecessary prescriptions of an addicting substance, and to control healthcare costs.

But this particular patient was suffering from pain. Horrible, nightmare pain. Pain that would not go away. She was going on a short vacation with her husband, the last one she would ever have, and I was determined she was not going to have pain on her vacation. "How would you like it if this was your wife, your sister, your daughter, and only had a month or two to live, and could not afford the narcotics," I asked him. How would you feel toward the person who tells her that we have to play by the rules without any deviation. That in so doing, her last one or two months of life would be spent suffering. So much suffering that she cannot sleep or enjoy a short vacation with her spouse. "How would you like it," I asked him, "if this was one of your family members or friends?"

For my second point, I asked him another question. "And if you were this woman's physician, wouldn't you advise your patient to call a lawyer? And don't corporate lawyers cost a lot more money than private lawyers? Wouldn't it be less expensive for your company to pay less than \$100 for a medication than to pay a corporate lawyer for 40 hours of work defending a lawsuit that the company was probably going to settle? Wouldn't \$100 be less than the punitive damages the company would have to pay?"

For my third point, I asked another question. "And what about negative publicity for your insurance company if it gets out that you are not going to pay for narcotics for a cancer patient? Wouldn't the negative publicity cause your company to lose business, so that a lot of people in your company will lose their jobs because of downsizing?"

I was not yet through with him. "And don't you realize," I asked him, "that the reduced expense you are trying to achieve will never benefit you, but only your CEO and the members of your board of directors?" "Do you really feel loyal to the top paid executives in your company?"

Guess I sort of wore him out. Like the widow in the parable. But I do not think I need to tell you what the outcome was.

The judge grants justice. And if that burnt out judge who admits to neither fearing God nor respecting people, if even he caves in, how much more will God answer our prayers? If even a hardened and insensitive judge will hear the pleas of a widow, how much more can we trust that God will hear those who day and night cry for vindication.

But sometimes our prayers are answered in ways we do not expect. Sometimes our vindication comes in through the back door.

### **Scene 3 – The widow is, and the judge becomes, faithful**

Is faith persistent? When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth? That is, when justice comes, will we recognize it? Will we will be open to a different answer than the one we are expecting? Or will the answer to our prayer come and we not even recognize it? Maybe what the parable is about here is not

persistence of prayer, but persistence of faith. Persistence of faith when our prayer is not answered the way we anticipate. William Barclay says we will never grow weary in prayer and our faith will never falter if, after we offer to God OUR prayers, we say to God, YOUR will be done. I have told you the story of one of my cancer patients. But in addition to his medical illness, he had something even more serious. He had broken relationships with his children, his spouse, and with God. And I have told you that before he died, he said that the extra time he had, allowed God to heal those broken relationships. That although he was not cured, he was healed. His prayer for cure was answered not with a cure, but with a healing.

But maybe this parable is not just about the faith of the widow, that is, not just about the faith of the person who cries out for justice. Maybe the parable is also about the transformation of that judge. That judge is not an evil judge. He is tired. He is worn out. He has forgotten what is important. He has forgotten what gives him energy. But maybe "that" judge is not "the other." Maybe "this" judge is you and me.

It is hard for me to believe that I have been practicing oncology now for 25 years. But after being in medical practice for less than 10 years, I was close to burn out. I went into medicine because of my love of people, but also because of my love of the science of medicine. Somewhere during my training, the science of medicine became what got me out of bed in the morning. The scientific aspects of cancer and its treatment are still fascinating. But enthusiasm for science is not enough to deal with the emotional burden of giving bad news. Most oncologists I know also have had or still have trouble dealing with this burden. And you can identify people who are burnt out. You can identify physicians who are burned out. They do not smile much. Or if they do smile, it is not genuine. They have a sour personality. They go through the motions but have lost their milk of human kindness. It was only when I remembered medical practice is not about science but is about people, that I regained my excitement for medicine. It was only when I remembered that I was not taking care of cancer, that I was taking care of people, that my enthusiasm for medicine returned.

That burned out judge in Jesus' parable is not an evil person. This judge is you and me. And though he does not know it yet, he is on the road to becoming faithful.

### **Conclusion**

Which character in this parable describes you? The judge or the widow? Like the widow, are you crying out for justice? Or, like the judge, have you turned a deaf ear on those who cry out in need? Faith requires different responses from the widow and the judge. Who are you? Are you the burnt out judge, or are you someone crying out for justice? Whichever person you are in this parable, are you listening?

You know you are near burnout, if you say that needy person needs to leave you alone. Needs to get a job like you did. Needs to pull himself up by his own bootstraps like you did. Needs to grow up. After all, you have done your time, and it is time for someone else to carry the load. If these are the things you are saying, maybe this parable is speaking to you. If you are saying these things, I believe Jesus is telling you persistence in faith means taking the time to look the widows, the hungry, the poor, and the children in the eyes, and in their eyes see Jesus.

For those of you crying out for justice, today's parable proves that God hears you. But persistence in faith means being open to a vindication you might not be expecting. Frederick Buechner tells us, "Even if God does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring himself to you. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers, it is that for which we really pray."

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...