



Pentecost 19 – Proper 24 (C)

Widows

[RCL] Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

There are a lot of voices in today's parable.

There's the voice of Luke, the gospel writer, who tells us this is a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.

There's the voice of Jesus, who tells this parable about a widow and a judge.

There's the voice of the widow and the voice of the judge.

If we've heard this parable in the past, we might also hear the voices of commentators who have offered interpretations about whom to listen to as we try to hear the word of Jesus for us today.

Commentators often say that Jesus's parable is about a widow who badgers an unjust judge until she wears him down and, though he doesn't give a fig about justice, he finally relents and gives her what she asks for. They point out that what the widow does in "wearing [the judge] out by continually coming" is, literally, to "finally come and slap [him] in the face" or "give him a black eye." This widow is relentless. She's tough. She's no pushover.

About the judge, interpreters are careful to point out that God is not like this judge. God is the opposite of this terrible judge, who doesn't care about God or people.

But we still end up with a comparison between the bad judge and the good God, both of whom face down an annoying petitioner. The point of the parable, they say, is something along the lines of *Be like the widow—incessant, dogged, and unafraid to pester and harangue God. God actually loves human beings and cares about justice, so you will be able to wear God down way more quickly than the annoying widow wore down the unjust judge. Persistence is all that stands between us and getting God to do what we ask. Get to it!*

The problem is that this characterization of the widow—bothersome, annoying, harassing, violent, even—is all, and only, the judge's opinion of her. He's the one who describes her that way. But why should we

trust his opinion? The only thing this judge is honest about is his lack of fear of God and concern for people. We might imagine him saying to his cronies at the club, “You should have seen her. She wouldn’t leave me alone! She’s hysterical, unhinged! Dangerous! Forget justice. I just wanted this loser off my back.”

That’s what the judge says about the widow.

What Jesus says about her is that she kept coming to the judge and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” That’s it. Jesus doesn’t call her hysterical, hotheaded, or violent. He does say her action is repetitive and durative—it continues over time. Like daily prayer over the course of a lifetime. Like going to church, week in, week out. Long after others have given up, stopped attending, stopped saying the words, she’s still there.

She wouldn’t be the first persistent widow in the Bible.

There’s Tamar, who, though it took years, wouldn’t let her father-in-law Judah deny her the right to have a child that was hers according to the law (Genesis 38). There’s Ruth, who wouldn’t let her mother-in-law return home without her and uttered the now-familiar words, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). There’s Bathsheba, made a widow by King David, who wanted to cover up his adulterous affair with her, who would not let David overlook her son, Solomon, when naming his successor.

These three widows are Jesus’ great-great-grandmothers, part of Jesus’ genealogy that kicks off Matthew’s Gospel.

These widows, and more, sometimes in a process that takes years, cling to God’s will, against opposition and against voices who say that God doesn’t care.

Or in answer to the question, “Does God keep God’s promises?”

In the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, there’s the widow Anna, who has been fasting and praying day and night in the Temple for more than sixty years, waiting, longing for the good news of the arrival of the redeemer. When she sees Mary and Joseph bringing the baby Jesus to the Temple, she praises God and speaks about Jesus “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:36-38).

There’s the widow of Nain, whom Jesus meets when her son has died and is being carried out of the town to be buried. Jesus has compassion for her and raises her son, her only son, from death (Luke 7:11-17).

There’s the poor widow, whom Jesus sees putting her last two coins into the temple treasury, “all she had to live on” (Luke 21:2-4).

There are lots of widows in Jesus' life. Maybe that's why he tells today's parable about a widow. He knows there are widows who are rich, poor, feisty, faithful, resourceful, persistent, dependent on others, speaking for themselves, aware of God's promises and trusting God will fulfill them.

But maybe Jesus tells this parable because Jesus is like this widow in his parable.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, he will be on trial before a bunch of unjust judges. Jesus will be brought before the Sanhedrin, who listen to him only to get the evidence they need to get the gears of injustice grinding against him. Jesus will stand trial before Herod—a puppet king—and Pontius Pilate—a man so cruel, even the Romans eventually dismissed him from being governor. Neither Herod nor Pilate cared about God or justice.

And yet, Jesus goes. He doesn't yell or shriek or rail or commit violence against them. He goes, and repeats, by his action of giving himself over, what he has been saying with his words, his teaching, his healing, his paying attention to widows all his life—that God is merciful and just.

The widow in the parable goes before an unjust judge to obtain justice against her opponent. Jesus goes before unjust judges to obtain salvation for an unjust world. The parable is not about badgering God until God gives us what we want. But it is about persistence in prayer in a hostile world that God is intent on saving. It is about our need for constant connection with God, which is prayer, as we live in this world and face injustice, but never lose heart that God keeps God's promises.

Perhaps that's why Jesus says, "Listen to what the unjust judge says." Why? Why would we pay any attention to that unrighteous jerk?

The context in which Jesus tells the parable is his teaching about the coming of the Son of Man in the fullness of time, at the end of time. In Luke 17, Jesus talks about how days are coming when you will long to see the days of the Son of Man, the time of God's justice, when the Kingdom of God will be complete, unmistakable, and obvious, and an end will come to the suffering and sorrow of all who have been crying out to God. That time is coming. It will come swiftly, suddenly. And God will not delay in granting justice. But it isn't here yet. Just listen to what the unjust judge says.

Maybe a lot of voices in the world sound like his.

Are we left to our own devices in the meantime?

Absolutely not.

We have prayer, to keep us connected to our God, the source of justice, mercy, our strength, and our salvation.

We have God's vindication of Jesus by raising him from the dead, God's declaration of the end of injustice, the defeat of petty tyrants, of puppet kings and violent overlords, whose power, in this world, looks like it will go on and on and on. It will not. The victory is already won. We've seen it in the face of the resurrected Jesus, who resembles a widow who looks powerless in the eyes of an unjust world, but knows she's already won.

Whose voice will we listen to? When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on the earth?

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