

Holy Hunger

Luke 18:1-8

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 20th October 2019

Jesus often told parables to get us to reimagine how we think about God. Our images of God are almost always inadequate; they are always in need of reform. Consider the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) in which Jesus paints a picture of a generous, forgiving, compassionate God who throws a party for a wayward, thankless, selfish child. However, if we apply this interpretative framework to the parable we have here in Luke 18, the story of an unjust judge, then we're left with a disturbing image of God. Is God really like this judge?

It's almost natural for us to move in this direction, I guess. Luke tells us that Jesus told them a parable about "their need to pray always and not lose heart" (Lk. 18:1). Prayer is directed toward God, of course, and so we are given the story about a judge. If there's one image of God that most of us carry around in us, which we learned at an early age, it's God as judge. In my experience, it's the image of God as primarily judge that needs the most reforming in our imaginations. Yes, God is judge. But God is also love (1 Jn. 4:8). So, then, what does judgment look like in a God who *is* love? God's judgment is always in service to love.

But I'm not so sure this is a parable about God. In fact, I think we should focus less on the judge and more on the woman annoying the judge. We should focus on the widow. For there's something about the way she demands a hearing from the judge, demands justice, which tells us much about the nature and purpose of prayer in the life of the faithful.

What do we know about the judge? He is shameless. He fears neither God nor people. He lacks empathy. He's insensitive to how his actions are perceived in the community or the impact his rulings might have on the community. The prophet Jeremiah made a similar indictment against those who ruled over God's people. "They acted shamefully, they committed abomination, they did not know how to blush" (Jer. 8:12). The judge was known for being a tough guy.

What do we know about the widow? Widows were among the most vulnerable persons in ancient society. Since women normally didn't appear in public courtrooms, we can assume that this widow has no male family member to be her advocate.¹ She is alone—and at odds with an opponent in the community. We don't know the context. What we do know is that she goes to the judge day after day seeking to be heard. Day after day she makes her case. She's relentless. She knows what she needs. She's committed to the truth. She will not yield. She's confident about the rightness of her claims. Every day she goes to the judge, insisting on justice.

Nevertheless, she persisted. And her persistence paid off.

Getting tired of her, the judge says to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming" (Lk. 18:5). The Greek verb usually translated "wear me out" derives from boxing and literally means "to give someone a black eye."² To have

a black eye means that one has been publicly shamed. And although the judge is described as shameless, he finally admits that in order to save “face” he better help the widow out because, as the parable suggests, the judge is intentionally withholding justice from her. He knows that she has a valid case. He knows she has a right to be heard. He knows that she deserves justice. She persisted. And so he yields.

Jesus frames the parable and interprets it this way: “And will not God grant justice to God’s chosen ones who cry out day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them” (Lk 18:7-8a). It might be easy to miss what Jesus is doing here, but he’s actually using a reasoning formula that was widely used by rabbis, which entailed moving from lesser to greater.³ If the lesser case is true—that a widow can finally get through to an insensitive, shameless, corrupt judge, then *how much more true* is the greater case—that a petitioner will be heard by a sensitive, good, kind generous God. From lesser to greater.

Therefore, be like the widow. Pray away. Demand to be heard. Demand justice from God. Justice, not “getting even.” From a Jewish and Christian perspective, justice is not “getting even.” A Jewish and Christian understanding views justice as *wholeness, fairness, restoration, mercy*. Keep praying for *this* kind of justice. Don’t wait for it. Don’t be passive about it. Be relentless about it, even bothersome. Throw yourself toward the good judge who wants to grant justice. Make a nuisance of yourself.

As William Gladstone (1809-1898) said, “Justice delayed is justice denied.” Gladstone was a member of the British Parliament. He had a career that spanned sixty years, with twelve of those years as Queen Victoria’s (1819-1901) Prime Minister. He was a relentless advocate for social justice and social reform. He thought about being a minister early in life. He was especially loved by the working class. Gladstone echoed what the widow knew, “Justice delayed is justice denied.”

This same mantra has been used by countless reformers and reform movements in the past two hundred years. To say to someone oppressed by injustice—*Wait. Wait. It’s not time. We’re not ready for... You’re not ready for... The nation is not ready for.... The church is not ready...*—is to deny justice. This is what African Americans heard in the struggle for civil rights back in the 1960s. *Wait. Wait.* The same was said to LGBTQ Presbyterians and their advocates pushing for ordination and same-sex marriage. *Wait. Wait.* To say, “Not today, come back tomorrow” to someone demanding justice is delaying justice and therefore denying that same justice.

Whether it’s the evil judge or the powers or forces—both within and outside the Church—that seek to conserve the *status quo*, there are always obstacles that get in the way of God’s intentions for the creation. But as God’s people we can’t just sit back or sit on the sidelines when justice is being denied. We can’t be passive. We are called to engage, to act, get involved.

If we listen to our gut we can feel the hunger pangs. It’s a holy hunger. The hunger *of* the Holy that desires justice and wholeness and fairness, restoration and mercy. The Holy Spirit

places that yearning in us and then summons us to yearn with the same desire. It's a hunger. And if you don't have it, may I suggest that you begin praying to be made hungry. God wants to use that hunger. God needs you to be hungry. Because God wants us to pay attention to that hunger, to that desire within us. God wants us to make demands of God, to make our case, to declare our hopes, to share our dreams. God wants us to wrestle with God, to contend with God. To fight with God for the good. God wants us to be persistent, even bothersome in our pleas for the good. The prophets often prayed this way, and we hear it countless times in the psalms: *holding God accountable, reminding God to be just, insisting that God show up and be God for God's sake.*

This might sound strange, maybe arrogant to relate to God this way. It might make you feel uneasy. But what if it's our desires, our hopes, our demands for justice that allow us to discover the true state of our hearts? What if approaching God this way allows us to grow-up and become mature people of faith? What if it actually draws us closer to God? What if through the hunger and the desiring after God and God's justice we find ourselves being changed, and maybe even the world? And what if that's the point? You just might find yourself becoming more compassionate, gaining greater awareness of the plight of God's children suffering in the world. With a holy hunger our hearts become wider and softer, our feelings and emotions deepen, and we actually become more human.

He had a holy hunger. The Honorable Elijah Cummings (1951-2019) wasn't willing to wait for justice to arrive. He pursued it, fought for it. He refused to be a victim of hate and evil. With dogged determination he fought for the rights of the outcast, the marginalized, the widow, the orphan, the wrongly accused. He demanded justice. Patriot, public servant, husband, father, friend, he was also a preacher of God's good news—he preached in this pulpit, back in the early 2000s, with a 102F fever. As he shared in the sermon, Catonsville Presbyterian Church was the first predominantly white congregation in his district to invite him to speak. He was determined to be here that morning. He was a tenacious fighter for justice. He suffered at the hands of evil and hatred, but refused to be a victim. He gave his life, offered his life as an instrument of grace and peace and truth and goodness.

As we remember and give thanks for his life, we honor his life—and the God he served—when we listen to our guts, and get in touch with our cravings, our holy hunger for justice. For these are challenging times, requiring much of us.

So what are you going to do?

Where's your voice?

Where do you need to be a nuisance for justice?

Do you have a hunger to stand with the weak and powerless?

Do you have a hunger to dismantle racism?

Do you have a hunger to protect the most vulnerable among us?

Do you have a hunger to speak against wrong?

Do you have a hunger to call out and hold accountable

those who abuse the office and power given to them by the people?

Holy hunger.

For justice: called to demand it, to pray for it, work for it, day after day—without losing heart. Not in some far off distant future.

But *now*.

May it be so.

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Pres, 1992), 381.

² Malina and Rohrbaugh, 381.

³ In Hebrew, it's known as *Qal wa-homer*, meaning "light and heavy" and refers to an inference from minor and major, an argument *a fortiori*.