

Persistence

Genesis 32:22-31 & Luke 18:1-8

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 16th October 2022

For many years, I kept some of my favorite quotes on my desktop (not my computer desktop, the actual top of my desk). I wrote or printed them out and placed them under a clear, plastic desk blotter so I could see them daily. I confess that I'm a quote-aholic. I love quotes and love sharing them. But a handful of quotes mean more to me than others. This week, one of these came to mind while studying and discussing this text in Luke, the so-called parable of the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow. It's a quote that I haven't thought about in some time. It comes from Gregory the Great or St. Gregory the Great. Descendant of Roman nobles with a strong legacy of Christian faith, he was the first monk to become pope. Born in Rome around 540, he died there in 604. Gregory is considered one of the Latin Fathers, a Doctor of the Church, a theologian, an administrator, an evangelist, and a prolific author. Here is the quote: "God wishes to be asked, God wishes to be forced, God wishes, in a certain manner, to be overcome by our prayers."

I have no idea whether Gregory had the widow in this parable in mind when he penned this remarkable sentence. I think, though, that it reflects what Jesus wants his disciples to see and know, especially as he prepares them for what's to come. This parable, and the one we heard last week (Luke 17:11-19), was given to his disciples on the way to Jerusalem. Jesus is preparing them, caring for them, providing for them, and loving them. It's perhaps easy to miss this, but it's in the first verse of chapter 18, maybe because we move straight to the parable and skip over this verse. Luke tells us why Jesus speaks to his disciples and not the crowd. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Lk. 18:1)—to not lose heart. To not be discouraged. To not lose courage. To not lose heart. Because there is and will be much in the world and in our walk with the Lord that discourages us, that depresses and overwhelms us, angers and infuriates us in the face of the enormity of injustices working against us and all God's children, that might even cause our hearts to break.

Like many of the parables we've looked at recently, this one is only found in Luke. It reflects themes important to the Lukan community, particularly justice, wholeness, and liberation. And so we have a judge—a judge who is a shady character who neither feared God nor cared for the needs of the people. One has to wonder how he ever became a judge in the first place. He has an enormous amount of power. And we have a widow pleading with him to rule justly in the face of her opponent or adversary. A widow—a person with little or no power in her society. Vulnerable. Not just this particular widow, but every widow. That's why the Hebrew scriptures, the Torah demands that as God's people, we must care for the most vulnerable among us, the widow, orphan, and the sojourner or homeless. It's all over scripture, particularly Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:29, 16:11 and 14, 24:19-21; 26:12-13, 27—this is only a sampling. This command is everywhere in scripture.

This dear soul is not a poor soul in the parable. She might be vulnerable with little power and without an advocate in court. But she is more than a charity case. You don't want to mess with her. Perhaps she's desperate and has nothing left to lose, or she's so confident in her cause

that she's willing to stand up to the powers that be and demand justice. We don't know. But what we do know is that she's relentless with her demands. Persistent. She never gives up. She's nagging him. Plaguing him. Pestering him. She's determined, tenacious, and fierce. And the judge appears to be afraid of her. "Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming" (Lk. 18:7). The Greek is much stronger. It has the sense that "I will grant her justice so that she doesn't give me a black eye." She is not helpless. She has agency.

The way of the widow teaches us something about prayer, Jesus says, something essential for us to know. Sometimes, we think of prayer as a way to get what we want or think we want from God. Sometimes we think we have to convince, nag, and pester God to answer our prayers, to get God's attention, that we have to do something to get God to be good toward us, to grant what we want or wish for. Unintentionally, I fear, the image of the unjust judge has been transferred to our image of God, a God who is aloof, distant, and doesn't really care about people and the suffering in the world. Many hold such a view of God and have, therefore, given up on God altogether. So what does Jesus want us to know about prayer?

The meaning of this parable is not found within the parable but in what Jesus says after it, after he tells the story of the unjust judge and widow to his disciples. "And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry to God day and night?'" (Lk. 18:6-7). This might be confusing here, but it's helpful to know that Jesus uses a rhetorical device used by rabbis in his day, first used by the great rabbi Hillel (c.110 BC – 10 AD). It's known as *qal wahomer*, meaning "light and heavy," or "from lesser to greater," or simply "how much more." It's used to make an argument. Jesus uses it often in his teaching. For example, if something is true at a lower or lesser level, then it has to be even more true at a higher or greater level—how much more. If the persistent, fervent prayers of the widow "availeth much" (James 5:16, KJV) before an unjust judge, just imagine how much more effective are the prayers of the widow, the prayers of one who asks for justice, indeed, *our* prayers for justice, before a God who is certainly just and good and gracious and faithful. "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to God's chosen ones, to us, we who cry to God day and night for justice? How much more. "Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Lk. 18:7).

Jesus offers this teaching to his disciples so they do not lose heart. Luke includes this parable in his Gospel because he doesn't want his community to lose heart, living post-resurrection and waiting for the Lord's return, a community suffering at the hands of an unjust empire that has little concern for the widow or orphan or sojourner, that only cares about money and dominating power and security. Luke is writing to the church in between the times, to a church that is always in between the times, waiting for the Reign of God that Jesus preached, embodied, offered, announced, *and* is also on the way, *both* here *and* on the way. And in this in-between time, there's work for us to do. We are summoned to "pray always" for justice on behalf of the widow, the orphan, the sojourner, the homeless, the vulnerable. Pray and not lose heart because God's justice has come and is on the way. It will come quickly, suddenly, in the moment when we least expect it. It will come, so trust. Don't lose heart. God has shown Godself faithful. God's Reign is coming—so pray.

Now, you might be asking yourself, why should we pray if God's justice is coming anyway? Why can't we just step back and wait for God? Why does Jesus say we must ask for it and cry day and night for justice? That might seem a little cruel. Why should we have to ask? Why doesn't God just give it to us?

Maybe because God doesn't wish to be God without us. Maybe God doesn't want to bring God's Reign without us. Maybe because God wants us to discover in the struggle, in the birthing of the Kingdom, what we truly desire within our heart of hearts, so that we cultivate the affections of our hearts. Maybe because God values our lives and our humanity so much that God wants us to grow, and grow up, grow into our humanity, to step more fully into our lives, listen to our hearts, and participate more fully in the world, into our likeness bearing the image of God. What if God wants us to bring our experience, our lives, bodies, agonies, and sufferings into how we pray and live? What if God wants us to have a part to play in the coming of justice? What if God really wants a relationship with us, wants us to be active, engaged, and involved, pleading for and demanding the justice of God?

And what if, sometimes, the way God gets us to grow and grow up, to act and get engaged, is by intentionally stepping back and allowing us to step in? This might sound like an odd notion, but it can be found in Jewish mysticism, in the Kabbalah, and I have come to see the value, wisdom, and truth in this idea. It's known as *zimzum*, meaning "contraction." It's most associated with Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), who said the creation of the universe required God to "contract" or "withdraw" a part of God's self to create a space, a void, to make room for the creation of the world. The world, the universe, humanity, truth, reality, and freedom emerge when God withdraws, contracts, and pulls back, inviting something new to emerge within that space. In order to have a relationship with the world, God contracts, creating a space for the creation to exist. This is how God creates all the time.¹

It's striking how in the parable, the unjust judge's *inaction*, his withdrawal, so to speak, calls forth the widow's action. I wonder, at times, that God, the *just* judge, chooses in love not to act, chooses to step back, making room for us to step in, act, and do what we might not have done had God done it for us. What if, then, we are being asked to answer some of our own prayers?

I heard this week of someone who had a friend "who would pray in his apartment for God to feed hungry people. Then he would leave, drive around until he saw someone who seemed to need food, and buy them a meal. Then he would return to his apartment and thank God for answering his prayer."²

I love this. It reminds me of something Miroslav Volf, a theologian at Yale Divinity School, once said, "There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you are unwilling to resolve." This applies to so many critical issues facing us today when "thoughts and prayers" become cheap and meaningless, a mockery of God. We had yet another tragic, horrific shooting this week in Raleigh, inflicting layers of grief and suffering. What are you, and what are we being asked to do together as a church? Where is our will to do something to bring about

change? We're being summoned to act. Prayer and action. Prayer as action. Prayer as a protest. This, too, is what it means to be people of faith.

What if this is why Jesus tells us to seek, knock, and ask for God's Reign? We're being invited to demand it. Fight for it. Struggle. Wrestle—wrestle with God, like Jacob. The lectionary pairing of Genesis 32:22-31 and this text in Luke is brilliant. Demand something of God. Demand justice. Throw yourself into the ring. Be like the widow—and don't lose heart. Be persistent. Relentless. Fierce. And don't lose heart. "God wishes to be asked, God wishes to be forced, God wishes, in a certain manner, to be overcome by our prayers." And don't lose heart.



Marc Chagall (1887-1985), "Bride with Fan" (1911)

¹Theologian Jürgen Moltmann makes beautiful use of this idea in his work, particularly *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Harper San Francisco, 1991), 87ff.

²Recounted by Preston Shipp on Twitter @preston_shipp.