

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

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*Luke 18:1-8*

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said 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." ' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'*

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The big, burly judge sat behind his desk in his office, smoking a cigar, and counting his money. His was a profitable business. Sure he was bound to uphold the law, but his higher allegiance was to money. Particularly the money that was handed to him in unmarked envelopes or tucked discreetly into his breast pocket during private conversations. He was the unjust judge. Everyone knew it. And those with means knew that he would support their cause - for the right price, of course.

Today, as he was counting his growing stack of money, his secretary buzzed him.

"What is it?" he growled.

"Sir, it's the old woman here to see you - again."

"Well, you know the drill; show her the door."

"Yes, Sir"

The next day, at exactly the same time, he gets buzzed again. "Sir, I'm sorry to bother you again, but the woman - you know, *that* woman - she's back!"

"Well, you know what to do!"

This scenario repeats itself day after day after day after day after day. But every person, even stubborn unjust judges, have their limits. Finally, after months of repeated inquiries, he could take it no longer. He gave in. He gave her justice - if only to get her to *finally* shut up! The old woman walked away smiling, knowing that justice had been granted. It only took a little - or a lot - of persistence and trust.

This is one of the most memorable parables in Luke's Gospel. From the get-go, we are conditioned to root for the poor old widow and to boo when we see the unjust judge. However, in a final twist, the unjust judge relents and grants the widow justice in order that he may finally be freed from her incessant pleas.

Every preacher, whether they admit it or not, has a repertoire of favorite sermon analogies from fellow preachers. One of my favorites is told by the Rev. Thomas G. Long and it goes something like this.

*I heard a delightful story the other day about the day that Mother Teresa went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, a legendary Washington criminal lawyer. He was a powerful lawyer. He at one time owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles and he was the lawyer for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, among others. Evan Thomas's biography of Williams tells the story about when Mother Teresa visited Edward Bennett Williams because she was raising money for an AIDS hospice. Williams was in charge of a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help. Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." Well, they agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no.*

*Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no." Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." Williams looked at Dietrich; they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, "All right, all right, get me my checkbook!"<sup>1</sup>*

After telling this story, Tom Long goes on to insist that today's parable from Luke's Gospel calls us to be *feisty* in our pursuit of justice. We are called to not take "no" for an answer!

As many of you know, my own personal repertoire of sermon analogies is filled with stories from the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Today's parable from Luke's Gospel reminded me of a particular part of that glorious movie. Andy Dufresne is a well-educated banker who is wrongfully imprisoned in a New England prison known as Shawshank. During his long tenure at this institution, Andy struggles to find meaning and purpose amid the bleak and harsh landscape of his incarceration. He begins to have this dream of starting a library for the prisoners. Therefore, he writes a letter to the governor's office asking for state funds to begin the library. As expected, he hears no response. Then, like now, most government officials are only interested in making money off of convicted felons and not giving them books to read.

So the next week, Andy sends another letter identical to the first.

And he does the same the next week, and the next, and the next, and so on and so forth. Each week, he stops by the warden's office, looking hopefully through the window, only to be told that there has been no response.

Finally, several months and dozens of letters later, Andy finally gets his answer. He gets called to the warden's office and finds boxes upon boxes of books and records and magazines. Furthermore, he is handed a letter from the governor's office and reads it aloud for one of the prison guards to hear: "Dear Mr. Dufresne, you will find, along with this letter, a number of books and sundries donated from area libraries. Also, we enclose \$500 to help you in your goal of creating a library for Shawshank prison. We trust this concludes our business. Please stop sending us letters."

The prison guard smiles and says, "Good for you, Andy."

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/133-thomas-long-program-5101>

Grinning, Andy just looks at the prison guard and says, "From now on, I'll just send *two* letters a week!"

This story reminds me that the granting of justice creates a hunger for more justice. Therefore, the granting of justice is not the end of the story; rather, it is just the beginning. The granting of justice is an infectious thing. Those boxes of books and the \$500 check did not satisfy Andy Dufresne's hunger for the library. It only fueled his inspiration to keep going.

All good parables leave us wondering what happened after its conclusion. Today's parable from Luke is no different. I like to imagine the "next chapter" of this parable going something like this.

The big, burly judge sits at his desk, smoking a cigar, and counting his money. He is looking forward to a peaceful, quiet day now that he has rid himself of that annoying old widow. He sips his single malt scotch as he reclines in his chair and crosses his feet upon his desktop, blowing a smoke ring into the air.

But then his relaxation is interrupted by his secretary buzzing him over the intercom.

"What is it now?" he grumbles.

"Umm, Sir, do you remember that old widow?"

"How could I *not*?!? Oh, God, it's not *her* again, is it?"

"No, Sir, it's actually one of her friends who heard what you did for her yesterday. She wants to know if she can come talk to you..."

Justice begets justice. And if justice can be served by even a cruel judge like the one in today's story, imagine how much justice will be served by our loving God!

Today's story reminds me of two things. First of all, at times we are the stubborn widow. We cry out to God for justice. I'm sure many of you, if not all of you, know what it's like to pray relentlessly for something that matters to you. To pray for something that is needed, something that is craved, something that will right a wrong. A broken relationship, a broken spirit, an empty heart, a thirst for happiness, health, love, hope, employment, companionship, sobriety, security.

We know what it's like to beg for something like the widow in today's story. We also know what it's like to hear "no" many, many times. But today's parable reminds us to be relentless in our trust that justice will be served.

But the second thing I am reminded of is that sometimes we are guilty of being the unjust judge. As individuals, and as a society, we have often been guilty of ignoring other peoples' cries for justice and mercy. Efforts for justice seldom are completed overnight. The 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, which granted women the right to vote, was only passed after years of work. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 only happened, likewise, after years of struggle (and there is still *much* work to do!). It has been less than two years since our denomination, the PC(USA), has agreed to welcome same-sex marriage. Until recently, a person who openly considered themselves a part of the LGBTQIA community could not be ordained as a session member or a pastor. The movement for these just acts to happen have literally been *decades* in the making.

Another particularly relevant piece of history is that at the April 1930 meeting of the Presbytery of Long Island at Shelter Island Presbyterian Church, there were people who were crying for justice in the form of allowing women to be ordained as elders. It was voted down. It was just too inconvenient and it challenged the status quo too much.

I'm sure that there were, and are, many voices that thought these cries for justice were annoying and inconvenient. There are many unjust judges in the world, and sometimes we are one of them. As the church, we are called to listen to inconvenient voices and be compassionate towards those who cry out for justice.

You may be wondering why I'm talking about this on this first Sunday in our season of Stewardship. So far, I have not mentioned money. I have not mentioned the budget or our financial needs as a church and non-profit here on this island.

Well, I'll tell you why we're talking about this today. Before we ask for money, before we return to God a portion of that which God has blessed us, we must first be perfectly clear as to who we are and what we are called to do with it.

As a church, we must be aware of voices crying out for mercy and justice. Those voices could be coming from anywhere. The voice might be the voice of a Latino worker here on the island who is being treated unfairly. The voice might be the voice of a heroin addict who needs to know that he is valued as a human being. The voice might be the voice of a person who finds this island a very lonely place and needs a place to call home. The voice might be the voice of a child who is in an abusive household. The voice might be the voice of someone who simply wants to be loved and not judged.

We, the people who are Shelter Island Presbyterian Church, exist and are called to listen to such voices. And not just to listen, but to *hear* those voices and stand with them. The moment we forget that is the moment we cease to be the Church. But if we keep this parable in mind, if we remember that Jesus calls us to stand with the marginalized just as he himself did, then we will be heading in the right direction, the direction that steers us into the places where the Gospel message is needed the most!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.