



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

“GOD IS THE WIDOW”:
19TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
11:15 SERVICE

GENESIS 32: 22-31
PSALM 121
2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4:5
LUKE 18: 1-8

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
OCTOBER 16, 2022

This parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow is not Jesus' easiest story. It is only found in Luke. Even for the early church, this parable was problematic. We can deduce this from the heavy editorial hand bracketing the text and telling us how we should understand it. The Lukan editor says: Jesus tells this parable to teach us to persevere in prayer. When Jesus' stories are not allowed to stand "as is", we should take note. Clearly, the early church was concerned that we might go off in a wrong direction with this story. Perhaps that we might become too preoccupied with how to pray "correctly" so that God grants us justice sooner rather than later? That could become an oppressive form of spiritual works righteousness.

What happens if we allow ourselves to wander inside the parable itself? The editorial framing says this parable is about persevering in prayer. We don't know that Jesus ever framed the story that way. For one thing, no-one actually prays in this parable!

What the story does tell us is that the unjust judge does the

right thing for the wrong reason. He grants justice to the widow so she doesn't keep nagging him. The Greek literally means: so she doesn't come and "hit me under the eye". It is a boxing term. The widow is not as weak as she seems. Widows had no societal status, people didn't know what to do with them if they weren't taken in by other family. But in this widow's tenacity, there is latent power. The judge thinks perhaps this woman may rise up one day.

There is another character offstage; the woman's opponent. We don't know who that is, but two likely contenders are among her own family. According to Jewish Law, a widow has only one "right" that she can legally claim. Her late husband's brother - if he has one - should marry her to protect her legally, and take care of her. If there is no brother, the woman's oldest son, if she has one, must look after his mother until he reaches 30 years of age. Knowing this, we might wonder about Jesus choosing to start his earthly ministry at 30. If Joseph had died earlier, perhaps Jesus was looking after Mary until he was 30? Joseph is depicted as older by tradition. Sometimes the exact reason is lost but the tradition remains, and maybe age and the

Law is the reason. In this parable, the widow's brother-in-law or her son may be the opponent refusing their legal responsibility. It may even be that the judge is being paid off by her family opponent.

The traditional interpretation is that God is by comparison a *fair* judge. If even a corrupt judge eventually does the right thing, how much more will God reward faithful persistence by bringing justice? A liberation theologian offers a quite different perspective. Once I heard this, I found I couldn't unhear it. Megan McKenna writes of a Bible study group in Chiapas, Mexico discussing this parable. A woman stood up. She was a widow. She said her son had been arrested and her husband and other members of her family were killed. She pleaded with the local judge for years, but he did nothing to bring anyone to justice. (Perhaps the judge was being paid off by a gang?) The woman said *we* are like the unjust judge, not caring for God or the suffering of the poor. We tire very easily of doing the right thing and may end up doing justice only when we have to. Or out of fear of what will happen if we don't. The

woman from Chiapas said: God is like the widow.

God is like the widow. Jesus speaks often of God's embodied presence in the poor, the orphan, the stranger, those who have no helper. We think of all the times Jesus singles out women as the voice of God. Pleading, persistent, on the margins, easily overlooked, dismissed, ignored, God the widow begs us to see, to care about justice and to do it, in matters small and great. The widow does not give up on the uncaring judge. God does not lose heart, God keeps coming after us. God comes after us all the more if we are unresponsive. That is what unconditional love does.

If we are the self-serving, uncaring judge, the parable reads something like this: If even we, who turn away from the needy so often, and even when we do justice, often act from mixed motives, how much more will God, who is tender-hearted and motivated by love alone, do the just and merciful thing.

We may also, by the way, be the widow's opponent. We

may be the one who is paying off the judge. We may uphold systems of oppression and injustice that benefit us. We may be withholding what is God's by right, as God's children through the Covenant of baptism.

This interpretation may not be where the textual edits direct our thoughts, but sometimes there is a subversive, hidden door in Jesus' parables leading directly into Kingdom of God. As McKenna puts it: Some doors we find, others find us. We are all called to conversion in this parable, to deeper relationship with God.

The widow is the One who calls us to deeper relationship with those in whom God lives, especially in the suffering and overlooked. Justice and persistence are linked here. Yet only part of this is about praying. The other part is everyday choices. We all see the deep needs around us on the streets of our city. The mentally ill homeless and the marginally housed. We see more homeless folk coming as regulars to our block, sitting at the gate or lying at the corners. It can a challenge to help in a meaningful way. We can help with lunches, clothes, with prescription costs and transportation

through our Discretionary Funds. Yet there are constraints and limits to what we can provide. There are school children and other tenants on our block who have legitimate concerns about security and access into the block by members of the wider community. For me, in these everyday realities and decisions, I try to remember that it is always Jesus coming onto our block, and naming that as a reminder is helpful. Last week, I asked Tony Serrano our Facilities Director: Did we give Jesus on Barrow Street corner lunch yet? We remember what St. Benedict says about treating every guest to the monastery as Christ. How we respond to Jesus on our doorstep is a matter of discerning what we can do, but no matter what illness this person is suffering from, no matter what their needs are, this man, this woman, this person in need is always, always Jesus.

AMEN

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