

Being the Blessing- Luke 18:1-8

We all know the woman in the parable.... the persistent one who won't go away. She's the outraged family member of every missing or murdered indigenous woman. She's the terrified immigrant in danger of being sent back to imprisonment or torture in the unstable country from which she fled. She is the gay or transgendered youth who looks for affirmation and simple dignity. She's the person of colour who fears that police will shoot first and ask questions later. She is the voice of creation stressed by climate change. We all know who she is. She is as close, or closer, than the air we breathe – because unless we're cut off from all reality, she is in our face every single day, invading our conscience and challenging our priorities. She won't go away, no matter how hard we try to avoid her.

Something tells me we know the judge as well. He's every powerful person who thinks he's above the law or the precepts of common decency. He's the person who thinks his wealth or fame or prestige entitles him to take advantage of others.... whether financially, politically, or sexually. He's the person with a moral code that finds excuses or justifications where none should reasonably exist. He's the person whose sense of social or intellectual superiority creates an invisible wall of privilege that insulates him from reality and blames victims for their misfortune. Here they both are in the parable – the powerful and the powerless in perfect juxtaposition, perfect tension.

Give me justice, the widow in the parable keeps repeating; vindicate me. And finally, reluctantly, the judge does – not because it's the right thing to do, not because he's had a change of heart, but simply to get her off his back, to be rid of the annoyance. So, Luke the Evangelist asks, if the unjust, unrighteous judge can offer justice in response to persistent pursuit, how much more will God who is righteous do for those who ask in faith? On the simple, obvious level it's an invitation to faithful perseverance – an easy platitude of sorts offered to those who have become discouraged in their Luke 18:1-8 faith, who feel their prayers are not answered. Faithfulness will pay off in the end, it seems to say; so keep praying, persist. Well, fair enough, good reminder, but maybe there's more to the story than that.

Parables open doors for us to walk through, and so it could be that God is hiding somewhere else in the parable, and so are we. So consider this: maybe the judge in the story isn't God, but us. Maybe there are times when we're the ones who prefer to ignore injustice when it confronts us. Maybe we're the ones who wish the injustice and inequities in the world would just go away and leave us alone. Maybe we're the ones who took to heart one of the original but theologically questionable verses of an old beloved hymn: ***'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate; God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate'***. Did God really create a social order of haves and have nots to let us collectively off the hook of caring for our neighbour? I don't think so. And Jesus, I believe, didn't think so either. But many of us grew up with, and were conditioned by, that very attitude....and it's hard to break free from it. If we were born to privilege, it's hard to loosen our grip.

So, then, if we're the judge in the parable, then perhaps God is the persistent widow. That turns things around, doesn't it? It's not a story about OUR faithfulness any more, or OUR persistence in pestering God until we get what we want, but rather about God's faithfulness to us, to humankind. No matter how lacking in compassion we might happen to be, no matter how we short-change God's dreams for us, no matter how selfish or stubborn or disconnected we seem to be from God's purposes, God doesn't give up on us; God persists; God sends out reminders and calls us to justice as a way of life. God always has been, is now, and always will be a God of hope who, like the widow in the story, keeps coming back to demand that we take stock of the gifts we have been given, and then live out the destiny to which we are called: to be blessings to each other, to the stranger at the gate, and to creation as a whole.

For God's faithfulness and for every opportunity to BE the mercy we pray for, we give thanks and together say Amen.

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