“No More Waiting Rooms”
Luke 18:1-8
Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *As your Word is read and proclaimed, O Lord, open our ears and hearts. Grant us the hope and encouragement we need. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

This summer, like many pastors, I’m taking a break from the Lectionary. Instead, I want to do a sermon series on the parables of Jesus.

Parables were Jesus’s favorite way to explain his central message: *the Kingdom of God*. He would frequently start by saying, “The Kingdom of God is like…” and then drop a story. But these stories weren’t just about religion or theology; they were deeply political and economic. They were designed to wake people up to the systemic injustice of the powers that be, drawing sharp attention to the massive gap between the rich and poor.[1]

Jesus’ parables are what John Dominic Crossan calls "challenge parables."[2] They challenge our conventional ways of thinking, upending our preconceived ideas about power, society, and God.

For this series, I want to start with one of the most misunderstood stories: *The Parable of the Widow and the Judge* (Luke 18:1-8). Typically, this text is preached as a lesson on persistent prayer. And understandably so—the author of the Gospel sets it up that way: *“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart”* (Lk. 18:1).

But another possibility deserves our attention. What if Luke has sanitized this parable in a way that softens its original force? Instead of a call **to resist social evil and confront injustice**, it turns the story into a simple lesson on staying patient in prayer. New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine argues that this is exactly what happened.[3]

Too often, we imagine faith like sitting in a waiting room. We’ve all been there—whether it’s the DMV, a doctor’s office, or a government bureau. Anyone who has sat in a waiting room knows the feeling. You don't set the

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[1] John Dominic Crossan & Richard G. Watts, *Who is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 51.
[2] John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of the Parable*, 47.
[3] Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperCollins, 2014), 248.

schedule. You wait until someone else calls your name. That's how many people imagine faith: waiting quietly and hoping God finally responds.

This "waiting room theology" is exactly how we tend to read this parable. We treat prayer like a ticket we drew at the door, hoping God eventually notices us. We look at the systemic injustice of our world—the exploitation of the poor, the corruption in high places—and we tell people to just sit tight. "Take it to the Lord in prayer," we say. "Be patient. God will fix it in the afterlife."

When our children were little, my wife, Des, taught them a song based on the traditional view of this text: *“We should always pray and not give up.”* But our son, Sam, who was barely four years old at the time, looked up and asked, “Mama, the poor people... have they given up praying, so that’s why they’re poor?”

Woah! “Out of the mouths of babes...” as the Bible declares (e.g., Ps. 8:2, Matt. 21:16). Our little Sam completely exposed the theological danger of the traditional reading. If prayer is just about begging God until God relents, then those who remain oppressed simply haven't begged hard enough.

But what if faith was never meant to be passive waiting? What if this parable isn't a spiritual sedative to help us tolerate the waiting room, but an eviction notice to the corrupt powers of this world?

To see this, we need to read this story from a different angle. That changes the way we understand the judge, the widow, and ultimately faith itself.

The conventional logic of this story has always been a comparison of scale: *If a corrupt, heartless judge will eventually give a nagging widow what she wants, how much more will a loving God answer your prayers?*

But this seemingly comforting comparison carries a theological cost. If the judge is a stand-in for God, then God is an unfeeling, distant bureaucrat. It implies that God sees your suffering, hears your cries, but chooses to sit behind a divine desk until pushed to God’s absolute limit. That is a deeply troubling, abusive image of the Divine.

Thankfully, that is not what Jesus is saying. Look at how Jesus describes the judge: he is a man who *"neither feared God nor had respect for people."* In the ancient Mediterranean, a judge who ignored divine law and

didn't care about community shame wasn't a symbol of God. He was the face of a broken system—one that answered to power rather than justice.

The first shift we must make is this: **The judge is not God. The judge represents the broken, exploitative legal and political systems of our world.**

The second shift is this. Because we've misread the judge, we've also misread the widow. We usually picture her as a pathetic, helpless victim—a frail woman weeping on a doorstep, winning her case through sheer, annoying persistence.

But in the ancient world, widows were often the most surprising characters. While they lacked male protection and faced severe financial vulnerability, t**hey were not completely powerless.** Women like Tamar, Ruth, Naomi, and Judith didn't just sit back; they navigated systems with incredible savvy, moved mountains, and took action.[4]

In the parable, **the widow is not a victim, but a courageous, active agent of resistance.** She refuses to accept injustice as inevitable. She keeps showing up until the judge can no longer ignore her. When the judge finally gives in, he says I will grant her justice, or she will wear me out by continually coming" (Lk. 18:5). The Greek word for "wear me out" (*hypōpiazē*) is a boxing term. It literally means "*to give someone a black eye.*" The judge isn't worried about being annoyed; he's afraid she'll punch him in the face if he refuses her. She doesn't simply plead—**she confronts power, refusing to back down until he gives in.**

This turns the entire meaning of the parable on its head. This story is l**ess about personal piety** (how often to pray) and much more about **bold social action.** It's about how we demand justice in a broken world. The core lesson: **demand justice now**.

At the very end of this passage, Jesus asks a haunting question: *"And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

[4] Ibid, 239-240.

He wasn't asking if he'd find people with the right theology, or right belief. He is asking something much tougher: "*When I return, will I find anyone who still has the courage to fight?*"

The real danger in a world of corrupt judges and broken systems is **delay.** As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."[5] When change comes too slowly, people grow weary. We stop believing our voices matter, settle into the waiting room, and lose hope that anything can change.

The parable of the Widow and the Judge challenges us to **stop treating prayer as a passive waiting room.** Faith refuses to accept "no" from a broken world; it demands justice **here and now**. When schools fail, we organize. When neighbors go hungry, we share our bread and demand living wages. When prejudice wounds the vulnerable, we stand with them and speak the truth. We refuse to accept injustice as normal.

The Kingdom of God isn't something God drops from the sky while we sit back and watch. St. Augustine once captured this perfectly by saying: *"God, without us, will not; as we, without God, cannot."* Fixing the brokenness of this world requires an active, nonviolent **partnership between God and us.**

Friends, let's refuse to settle for the status quo of a broken world. Step out of the waiting room. Channel the holy, disruptive spirit of the widow, and demand justice—here and now. When we do, we finally align our faith with God's ultimate desire for righteousness.

May God help us. Amen.

[5]Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letters from Birmingham*, 1963.