

The Parable of the Persistent Widow and Unjust Judge
The Rev. Amy Spagna
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Luke 18:1-8

"Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice." (Luke 18:5, NRSV)

To our modern American sensibilities and ideas about the rule of law, it's a good thing that "justice" and the entire court system are not supposed to work quite the way the one in this parable does. Where our court system is, at least in theory, a place where race and one's ability to pay for counsel should not affect outcomes, the same cannot be said for the court in the parable. That one is a place where the squeaky wheel gets the grease, so to speak. The ideal of equal justice under the law doesn't seem to matter a whole lot, either. If we still operated that way, we'd no doubt be witness to much worse abuse and malfeasance than the unjust judge displays.

There are many layers of meaning in this parable, and I'd like to focus on just two of the issues it raises. One: what does "justice" constitute in this case? Why does it matter that it's a widow who receives it, despite the less than honorable motivations the judge has for giving it to her? And two, what's the actual point of the parable – if it is not that God is as callow as this judge is and only responds to repeated begging, then how should we best understand it?

What we have in this court case is a marginalized and vulnerable person, a widow, who has agency and will not take no for an answer. We also have a judge who cares only that this widow keeps hitting him in the face with her complaint. What she's after is justice, in an Old Testament sense – that is, where she is protected and gets her needs met as the Law demands. There is a variety of scholarly takes on who this widow

is, and what she's after. However, the only concrete things the text actually tells us is that "she has access to the court, and she does not invoke property as a reason for her appeal."¹ What we can say for certain is, she is no shrinking violet. Despite the Biblical stereotypes which insist that widows are poor, helpless, and likely abused, she is none of those things. Luke instead paints her as someone seeking revenge, or vindication, though he's not clear about exactly for what. She wants what she feels she rightfully deserves – and will not stop until she gets it, even if it takes humiliating an officer of the court in the process.²

As for Luke's specific context, and what exactly "justice" might mean, it's helpful to remember that Luke's account consistently demonstrates a firm grounding in the Hebrew Scriptures. From the very beginning, he tells his readers that Jesus embodies the fulfillment of prior prophecies. He doesn't go quite as far as Matthew does, where Jesus says, "I have come not to abolish [the law] but to fulfill [it]" (Mt. 5:7b, NRSV), though that idea is very much present throughout Luke. This parable's focus on justice and judges is meant to send us straight back to the law codes contained in Exodus and Deuteronomy to try to understand exactly what's at stake in this widow's petition.

Deuteronomy 10:17-18 describes God as a God who "executes justice for the orphan and widow" – two distinct groups who, absent the protection of a male relative, were literally reduced to having to beg for food and shelter. The law codes make explicit that caring for such marginalized individuals was simply expected, in a "do this or else" kind of way. The widow in the parable seems to want to hold the judge to that

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, "The Widow and the Judge." In *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 249.

² Levine, "The Widow and the Judge," 242-3.

ideal. She is unhappy about the judge continuing to ignore her, and so she takes action. It's something we see all the time these days. For example, there was a news story several years ago about a fan of the Houston Texans football team who was so upset about the way the team was playing that he went to the quarterback's house, stood in the driveway, and told the quarterback, loudly and with a lot of salty language, exactly what he thought. Perhaps unfortunately, he left before the police arrived to arrest him for trespassing. It could have been much worse, but by the same token, it didn't accomplish much to help the team play better. The widow's actions are similar to this fan's, but her beef is much more profound: she wants *justice*, the protections and rights due her under the Law. Period.³

Judges, for their part, were expected to dispense justice as God would; they were to "fear God, [be] trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain" (Exodus 18:20). This is decidedly NOT the judge in the parable. He neither fears God nor has respect for anyone else.. and his motivations in dispensing justice on behalf of the persistent widow are ultimately self-serving. He literally wants her to stop hitting him in the face with her complaint – and, as some commenters on this text suggest, preserve his own reputation among his peers in the process. He doesn't come off all that well in the end because of that motivation. And, it's not hard to imagine how he might have described it to some of his fellow judges at a dinner party afterward: "This widow came to my courtroom and just would not take no for an answer! It was embarrassing that she just wouldn't let it go. I had to throw her a bone just to get rid of her – she made my life so hard!

³ Alyce McKenzie, "The Widow and the Unjust Judge: Persisting in Pursuing Justice." <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/power-persistence-alyce-mckenzie-10-15-2013> [accessed October 10, 2022].

Nope, it's not that good of a look for the judge. But, the parable isn't making some moral commentary about the court system in general, or about the questionable ethics of this judge in particular, or even about the challenges of trying to live on the margins in a fundamentally unjust world. What Jesus is doing with these two characters is instead, to "challenge the assumption of the helpless widow, giving her agency and authority to challenge corrupt power... [and to] demonstrate that pursuing justice, and especially in relation to the widow and other vulnerable populations, was a necessary part of what it meant to live ethically in relation to God and each other."⁴

This parable, like the others which immediately precede it, defies easy interpretation. It doesn't stand alone. It's bracketed by an introductory note on prayer at one end and "... an early interpretation (whether Luke's or not is difficult to tell) of the parable on the other."⁵ It also comes right after Jesus' teaching about the events which would mark his return. That effectively acknowledges that the kind of persistence in the face of seemingly unsurmountable obstacles is exactly what is required for the followers of Jesus who were just settling in to the reality of the long wait for his return. When we hear it with this framing in mind, what the parable seems to be saying to us in this time of change is: keep it up. don't lose hope. If we persist in seeking God's justice, in trying to ensure God's will is done, and stay the course, justice will finally come about – even if it's only because we would not just let it go.

⁴ Francisco J. Garcia, "Commentary on Luke 18:1-8." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-luke-181-8-5> [accessed October 10, 2022].

⁵ David Lose, "Commentary on Luke 18:1-8." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-luke-181-8> [accessed October 20, 2022].

