

The Widow and the Judge (Parables 6)

Luke 18:1-8 & 1 Kings 17:8-24

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First Presbyterian, Luling

This parable always reminds me of Jordan¹. He was a kid in my youth group in San Antonio. When I arrived, he was still in elementary school, but he was famous for being a handful, even for the veteran Sunday school teachers. Word among the teachers was that he must have ADHD, and his parents must not make him take his medication on the weekend, because he was always out of control. Well before Jordan graduated into youth group, well, as they say, his reputation preceded him.

And indeed he was a handful, prone to do his own thing rather than what I had planned, a kid who absolutely bounced off the walls if I fed him sugar, a kid that drove me to tears, in front of him, more than once. Once Jordan's mind was made up either to do something or not to do something, there was no changing it. In some ways, this was admirable. But when I was trying to get him to do something he didn't want to do, it was maddening.

He had his own kind of charm, and he was very smart. He just tended to use his intelligence and charm for less than charming ends. What I am going to describe next happened so many times that I can't remember one particular instance. He did it all the time. So let's say we were at the church for a regular youth group meeting, and Jordan took a notion that he wanted ice cream, or candy, or a soft drink. There was a convenience store within walking distance, so he would start to pester me. Monica, can we go to the store? No, Jordan, we can't go to the store. Monica, can we go to the store? No. He would not stop asking, no matter how many times I said no, no matter how sad or angry or bored I sounded when I said no. He wouldn't give up. Ever.

Finally, after using up my patience for the next 50 years on this kid, I asked him, "Jordan, does this work on your parents?" He stopped. Kinda grinned. And said, "yeah, sometimes." Apparently often enough that he decided it was worth trying. He knew exactly what he was doing, and what he was doing sounds a whole lot like what the widow in the parable was doing. Pestering. Persisting. Importuning, if you want to use a fancy word. Asking so many times in a row that

¹ Name changed

finally his parents, in an effort to hang on to a remnant of their sanity and to get him to be quiet, just said yes.

I am happy to let you know that Jordan has grown up to be a productive and functional member of society, has a wife and an adorable baby boy, which all makes me feel a bit like a grandma but also grateful for the ways people grow up, given time and space to do so.

But Jordan the middle schooler is the one that I can't get out my mind when I'm reading this parable of the widow and the judge. Persistent, to the point of being annoying, way past annoying. Luke introduces the parable by telling us it is a parable about our need to pray always and not lose hope. If we take Luke at his word there, then it seems to place us in the shoes of the persistent widow, which would be ok. And persistence in prayer is admirable, and something we could all stand to improve on.

Beyond that, this idea seems to fall apart in significant ways. To start with, if the widow is the person praying persistently, and the person to whom she is addressing these requests is the judge, then that puts the judge in place of God. This is a problem, because the parable makes it pretty clear that the judge is not a figure worthy of being equated with God. The judge does not revere God. The judge does not respect people. The judge bases his judgment on how annoying the widow is being, or—depending on how literally you read the word translated in our version “wear me out”—or he bases his judgment on his own reputation or even on a threat of physical harm. In any of those possibilities, he does not base his judgment on the merits of the case, which we don't know either. He is not impartial. The judge is a poor example of a judge, much less as a representative of God. This judge does not do any of the things that we know God does. This judge is not a faithful judge, nor a righteous judge, nor a biblical judge, so he simply cannot be a representative of God in this parable.

And what do we think about the widow? The chapter in the book this week challenges us to think about our stereotypes, and the Bible's stereotypes, about widows. We tend to think of widows as characters to be pitied, all alone, without many resources, even tending toward helplessness. Scripture has that view, too, and encourages us—as in the Call to Worship psalm today—to care for the widow and orphan, as God cares for them. But Scripture is also full of the opposite characterization of widows. Resourceful, feisty, persistent, a little bit sneaky. The story we read from 1 Kings is just one example of this second picture of widows in the Bible.

This widow is at the end of her food and is prepared for death for her and her son. The prophet Elijah arrives on the scene, asks her for food. She objects, as she is just about out of food and already starving herself. He convinces her that God will provide, she finally relents, and God indeed does provide. In the second half of the tale, the widow's son is either dead or all but dead. She is understandably upset and furious at Elijah and his God. This is the kind of thanks she gets after giving her last bits of food and housing Elijah for weeks and weeks? She is not weak or meek or helpless. She argues and objects and protests. She seems to be in charge of her own household. She isn't reliant on strangers; in fact, the stranger who is Elijah ends up relying on her. This widow that confronts the judge in our parable seems to fall into this second category of widow stereotypes. Feisty, outspoken, self-reliant.

Where does that leave us, then? This parable is particularly hard to figure out, I think, even more so than the others we've looked at these past six weeks. There are significant chunks of information missing: who is the other party in the dispute that has brought the widow to court, over and over? What is the dispute about? Why have they not been able to settle it out of court? What is the widow's situation? What does it mean that the judge neither feared God nor respected people? And why in the world doesn't Jesus include the answers to any of these questions? Does he think he's given us sufficient information to figure out what he means? Are none of these answers important?

If so, Jesus is overestimating me. I'm not sure I understand. I'm not sure that the answers to my questions aren't important to the story. If you'll recall the other parables we've read over the last six weeks, this isn't the only time Jesus has done this to us. What are we to make of this? How are we to think about this? What lesson can we draw from this, at least for this moment and this context? Parables aren't intended to have easy answers, but goodness gracious, this one is fuzzy.

Nobody seems admirable. The judge doesn't fear God or respect people. The widow is annoying, perhaps threatening. And when we read carefully, we realize we don't know if her cause is just or if she's trying to get revenge on someone. When we read a story, a book, watch a movie, we want to be able to identify with one of the characters, and we want that character to be a good guy. But there isn't a good guy in this parable. The judge is obviously not. We tend to think the widow must be the good character, because she's the only character left, but it's not entirely clear that her side is the right one.

What do we make of all this? For now, for this time with this parable, this is what I'm going to say. It will probably change almost by the time I've said it, but today I think this is a word worth saying out loud. In a time when our culture expects us to make instantaneous judgments about people, about actions, about words, about lack of action, this parable can serve as a warning. In a time when we are encouraged to decide if someone is on our side or against us, if what someone said is acceptable or not, if someone did the right thing at the right time or messed up somehow, in a time when judgment is expected and encouraged, a time when we are pushed, persistently, to judge what side we are on, in a time like this, the parable of the widow and the judge calls us to: take a step back, to take a deep breath or two or ten, to look and listen closely, to figure out what information is missing from what we are being told, to resist the temptation to take sides rigidly, without room to adjust or change our minds.

It wouldn't hurt us to not rush to judgment. It wouldn't hurt us to get more information about the people and situations that come to us. It would serve us well to not mistake persistence for righteousness, that just because someone repeats something a whole bunch of times doesn't make them right. And on the other hand, it would serve us well to base our own decisions and actions on something real and concrete rather than solely on an emotional reaction. We can learn from both the widow and the judge, even though neither one of them are purely worth imitating.