

"Listen to what the unjust judge says..." In truth, that is often all we are able to hear as Jesus offers this particular parable. Sure, we might be encouraged by the widow's determination, but she is not the best example of faithful persistence offered in the gospels. We sometimes imagine this small, strange story is an indictment of corrupt institutions. While Jesus has no patience with corruption, that does not seem to be the point.

Listen to what the judge says:

"Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, SO THAT SHE MAY NOT WEAR ME OUT BY CONTINUALLY COMING."

This person knows what justice is. He recognizes the widow's need; he never suggests that her claim isn't legitimate...he simply doesn't care about her claim. His position acknowledges that justice can (and should) be done. But his offer of justice comes only out of respect for his comfort and convenience. Such thinking is not limited to corrupt individuals (or institutions). The rules around the distribution of justice apply equally to everyone,, in theory. But the judge's speech suggests that such rules are set aside easily and often. The widow's claim is granted, but justice is not done. And Jesus declares that God is better than that.

We have no way of understanding the mystery of God beyond our limited capacity for comparisons. We compare the unknowable to the known. God is like...God's mercy is like...God's love is like...we cannot help it. We measure God against a human scale. No wonder we find it so easy to claim that God has disappointed us.

Though the persistence of this widow is admirable, it is also laughable in the circumstances. Widows are doubly disenfranchised in Jesus' day - women who have lost their single point of contact with most social structures.

God - not God

Sure, the Hebrew Scriptures call occasionally for special of widows (and orphans), but in truth, their situation is perilous at best.

So why does Jesus so often choose a widow as the focal point of his teaching? There were plenty of folks who qualify as outcast in those days - is this a plea to the deep emotion of his listeners? An attempt to tug at the heartstrings? Plenty of people would identify with the mother/grandmother figure who wades into an impossible situation because she has nothing to lose. Feisty; fearless; these are the qualities that are often displayed by those who are on their last chance. The widow is a very appealing archetype. A judge, the perfect opponent. Selfish, smug and eminently powerful, he concedes this 'small' defeat for the sake of his comfort...listen to what the unjust judge says...

But because this is a story told by Jesus, it is ultimately a story about God. And God, so often portrayed as judge over all creation - arbiter of our existence - God is different. At least, that's what Jesus claims. God grants justice - real justice - to God's chosen ones who cry out. Long has this been the case, and still faith is hard to find. Jesus is pushing our definitions; of justice; of mercy; of the speed of God's actions, most importantly Jesus demands we consider our understanding of who God is.

When we divide the world into spheres of 'right' and 'wrong'; when we organize humanity into 'us' and 'them'; when we dare God that chooses between one or another; in each of these acts, we cheapen the mystery of divine sovereignty. By necessity - limited by our all too human imaginations - we have robbed God of the power that God alone has. Creation - even considering the accumulation of all human knowledge - remains a mind-numbing mystery. Our feeble attempts to classify and organize and inventory the wonders of our experience of reality have fooled us into thinking that God thinks (and acts and organizes) just as we do.

God - not God

So a divine judge MUST play favourites. Divine mercy can be influenced. Grace comes in a spectrum, according to our need. Love becomes a commodity and life is ruled by rights that God may or may not have granted.

Not so, says Jesus...though not in so many words.

Jesus is quite often inclined to leave conclusions to the listener - to force his audience to exercise their imaginations beyond the normal, human limits. Jesus is the master of the rhetorical question. Hear what the Lord of life says:

“And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”

God acts. Justice is done. Though what that looks like (and whether or not we will recognize God's justice when we see it) is something else all together. That too is part of our human problem. We know what we know, and Jesus is pointing us to things which we cannot know - things that must be taken 'on faith'.

Justice, according to Jeremiah, can look like a radical change in fortune; the difference between struggling as a nation and thriving. Justice can look like a radical change in attitude; from seeking knowledge about God to knowing the Lord. Justice is more than just a principle, it becomes common practice - so say the prophets; and Jesus will show us the length, depth, height and breadth of the practice of justice. Merciful, compassionate, even occasionally outraged - but never spiteful, and never selfish. Jesus understanding of Divine justice is given human expression and takes human form. Touching the untouchable; speaking and eating and simply being with those who had been left behind by what humanity calls justice.

Jesus lesson is one that must be learned over and over again. The pull of our humanity is strong. We know what we know, and the logic of the unjust judge has a strong attraction. But the attraction of Jesus is strong too. He calls to us through our deepest fears, from the misery of the cross, from the mystery of the empty tomb and says 'here is the light to guide you. Follow me.'

This is what justice looks like - that all should know the love of God, and all should know this abundant life. Thanks be to God! Amen.