

Standing with Your Neighbor

Luke 18: 1-8

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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Scripture today is from the Gospel of Luke, the first eight verses of chapter 18. Here Jesus tells a parable about a widow and a judge.

“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “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.”’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge 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. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’

This is the word of the Lord...Thanks be to God.

We have been looking through the lens of the parable to help us discover ways to connect with our neighbors. Ways that move us out from these church walls to be in ministry in the world. So a sermon on The Widow and the Judge on Mother’s Day may seem odd. You may have come expecting one of the scripture lessons on motherhood. Maybe from the Psalmist – “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” or Isaiah “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.”

We meet unusual characters as we explore the parables. The parables usually jar us and make us see things from a new angle. Today we find a widow and a judge.

Who is this widow? The people who heard this parable from Jesus had a concrete image of who the widow is. She is more than a husbandless woman. She lived outside the structure of what was once her community. She did not have a man who ruled her life. She was in a unique class. Being on her own a widow could make some of her own decisions, just as a man could, but her options were limited. All her husband's possessions, land, livestock, all his property, **their** property, went to the nearest male heir. She might be able to remarry but it would have to be her husband's next of kin, and if he did not marry her, she was alone. Life revolved around the community, and she no longer had a place in it. The only possible resource she had was her bride price, money her husband had paid before their marriage, which her family held. But, we don't know what case she was pleading. Palestine did not have social security or pension benefits, rarely even a way to make a living. And what if she had young children? We usually think of the widow as an old woman, but life was short, remember Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi.

What about this judge? A judge was to be a representative of God. In Second Chronicles we hear King Jehoshaphat appoint the judges and give them these instructions: 'Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings but on the Lord's behalf; he is with you in giving judgment. Now, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes.' But this judge had none of those characteristics. Not our judge in today's passage. He is everything a judge is not supposed to be. To

make it even worse the judge was often an elder of the community and took care of local issues. The widow was likely someone he knew. In a rural village, everyone knows each other; he might have even sat at her table and shared a meal when her husband was alive.

When Jesus told this parable both of these characters, the widow and the judge, would have made the people sit up and take notice, because they both acted completely out of character. The woman used the only resources she had, her voice and her passion, not the passive behavior expected of a widow. She was not the meek woman they expected; to them she was acting shameful. The judge, in his contempt for God and everyone else, as the one expected to display honor, he was the shameful one.

This is a parable that may seem straightforward and simple. Jesus tells us to pray and not lose heart. This widow keeps after the judge until she gets what she wants and then she disappears. But, we are left wondering about her. What was her complaint? Was it the same complaint her sister widows came before the judge with? Does she strut by them as they stand in line waiting their turn shaking her decision in their faces?

She may have felt that God had heard her, but did the others? What effect would this unreasonable capitulation by the judge have on them, when he rules just to get her out of his face? Would it cause them to lose heart? Would it cause you to lose heart?

As I reflected on this scripture thru the lens of Mothers Day, the widow's voice took the shape of every mother who has ever pleaded for justice for her

child. Pleading for a child will make a mother forceful, persistent, and shameless in her passion. She can act totally out of character.

Mothers are strong, tough and relentless. These characteristics should be valued today, but as in ancient Palestine, they are often sneered at. We hear of the tiger mom, the helicopter mom, and I recently heard of the lawn mower mom, who clears all obstacles out of the way for her child. In the voice of the widow, I hear the fierceness of a mother who stands in the face of the judge while her heart is breaking. The one who will continue the fight when others have long ago thrown in the towel.

We see the judge in many of our societal structures. We see the judge in government officials, our school and health care institutions, the justice system, the many structures that causes us to stumble because **all things are not equal**. All voices are not equal. We come upon them every day. Most of us don't have to plead every day, for many it is just on occasion, seldom relentlessly. But, there are those who must plead every day.

The face of the widow, these mothers are confronting us everywhere we look:

- The widow as seen in the faces of the mothers fleeing violence in South America, standing at the border, wanting their children to be safe, to have a chance to grow up
- We hear them demanding to know why, once again, their children are being gunned down in their classrooms
- Pleading for marriage equality and equal pay, fair pay to take care of their families

- We see the brokenhearted, lonely face of a mother mourning the death of her child, searching for comfort, only to find everyone too afraid to face her.
- In the mother pleading to find a bed in a facility for her drug addicted or mentally ill child, knowing it is the only way to save his or her life.
- Pleading for accommodations that will give her learning disabled child a chance to learn, to be independent.
- And the mother living in fear that her child could be murdered for the color of his skin, her sexual orientation, or for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Many of these needs seem removed from us here in Lake Forest. Many of us have seen the face of the widow in our neighbors, for some it is our own face. And Chicago is only 30 miles away, and North Chicago is even closer. We see her everywhere.

While I was doing my chaplaincy in seminary, I came face to face with the pain of these mothers who feel they have no way out of the injustice. I sat in the emergency room in Trenton, NJ with a young mother who was once again attending the funeral of a young shooting victim, only to have the church in which the funeral was held become a place of horrific violence. She was desperate to escape the violence of Trenton, to give her two young sons a life, a chance to grow up, but she felt there was no way out. She did not even have the opportunity to voice her plea without fear of rejection from her own community; she could only whisper her fear to a stranger, who could only sit at her side and listen. We sat and looked through the windows of the

emergency room at a wall of police officers that separated her from that community.

Not sure where she belonged, she finally got up and went back out into that uncertainty. Who will stand with her as she pleads? Will we?

Some mothers cannot continue to plead, their child is gone, or it has taken so long that they are worn out. How will we present them with the final verses of this passage? “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. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Because for some mothers the judge’s capitulation will never come.

Instead of the vision of the widow striding off with her hard won victory, I see her getting back in line with the others. Folding herself in beside them. Adding her voice to theirs out of gratitude. Pleading and praying when they no longer have the stamina. Singing the psalms when they cannot. Could this be a glimpse of the justice Jesus speaks of? Could this be a place where the Son of Man finds faith? Our standing with the outcast widow, our neighbor, each other, leaving no one standing alone?

Are you the pleading widow today? Where will you join the widow’s voice? Who will you stand beside? We cannot clutch our triumphs to our chest, or wave them over our heads and walk away no matter how hard we have fought. As decisions on healthcare/Medicare/education/safety/equality play-out we begin to see who is left at the crack to squeeze through, and who

is pushed again to the back forced to fight their way to the front, again.

Losing heart would seem likely in the face of such defeat, but if we hold tight together praying together, we can cause that crack to split open.

Jesus never calls us to ministry in the comfortable spaces of the world. We never hear him say, “find a lush green valley without blemish and settle in.” He calls us to the desert and out onto the rough seas. But, he also never calls us to be there alone, we are to take companions with us, to join together in ministry, to join our neighbors.

The decision of the judge does not matter if we must continually come back to plead our case. Continue to pray and do not lose heart because Christ has shown us the way. He has told us – love your neighbor. As we move into uncomfortable spaces in faithful support of the widow know that we are not alone, and our prayers never go unheard.

We may be afraid to be completely vulnerable, to stand up and insist on justice for the widow, but there is a crack in our protective shield. When we write our prayers for God’s help to overcome the obstacles that get in the way of our helping our neighbor, we are continuing to pray, we are busting the crack open. We are taking the first steps to stand with our neighbor that will become a journey for justice and peace. AMEN