

Gospel - Luke 18: 1-8

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Sermon 10.16.22

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What does it mean for us to pray like the widow?

Because Jesus doesn't give any specific details in his parable, we're free to imagine whatever sort of widow we want. We can imagine, like one commentary I read, a weak little old lady leaning on her cane. A soft-spoken succinct woman who shows up every day with her plea down to one simple and sentence "I want my property restored to me," and receives what she wants because of her faithfulness. In that scenario, we prayer is orderly, dignified, and quiet.

However, in the dozens of commentaries I read, a different view of the widow prevailed. Writing in his book *The Cultural World of Jesus*, biblical scholar John J Pilch helps set the context for this parable by saying that the word widow in Greek meant one who has no voice. A widow would usually have a male relative speak on her behalf because she had no rights for property or inheritance.

But this widow doesn't have a male figure to advocate on her behalf. She is speaking on her own behalf, demanding justice. Pilch notes that she was not speaking in private at judge's chambers as we might imagine today. She was confronting the judge in a very public forum in front of other people, and that the judge's failure to act would bring shame upon him.

And Pilch goes on to say that in the literal translation of the Greek, the judge gives in not because he is moved by the widow's persistence, but because he fears the woman will give him a black eye, or in the figurative translation of the Greek, blacken his reputation.

The prevailing view from commentators is that we should emulate the widow's behavior. We ought to be persistent. We ought to be relentless. And while this is meant to be encouraging, I find myself too much like the judge, who says he doesn't care about public opinion, but caves in to save his reputation.

I confess that I want people to think well of me and demanding and screaming day after day for justice isn't a path to popularity. It's a recipe for being ignored, for sidelong glances as friends and strangers go out of their way to ignore us, and depending on where we're protesting, it's behavior that can lead to restraining orders, arrest, a jail term, or worse.

There's much to admire in this widow being able to risk public opinion, being able to withstand rejection day after day, and her certainty in her claim. What injustice would make me brave enough and persistent enough to continue act like the widow? And my bigger question: how do I know I'm actually seeking justice in my personal life?

When I became a Christian in my mid 20s I had extremely limited experience with prayer and even less experience in managing conflict. Back then my way of praying in difficult situations was to rant in my journal and plead to God to make everything better by changing the person whose behavior I perceived as making me uncomfortable, anxious, or angry. I never once asked to change my own behavior, or to expand my point of view, or to change my expectations, or to extend grace to those I was in conflict with. As my faith has matured, I still sometimes want to demand that others change, but the less I feel justified in pleading to God to grant what I want, because it's usually me who needs to change. I don't know that I'll ever be wise enough

to look at my own wants and needs and to decide what is just. But I can, like the widow, show up for prayer, and bring to it these words from Thomas Merton:

*My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*

*And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.*

*I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*