

A Vengeful Widow and a Tired Judge
A Sermon on Luke 18:1-8
Proper 24
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Introduction

Sometimes preachers do a really good job of watering down the gospel. Jesus' parables don't lend themselves to easy moral conclusions. They are intended to turn our conventional expectations upside down. Preachers can be uncomfortable with the discomfort that the parables cause us. They want to make the parables easier for the parishioners to digest. We get comfort food instead of roughage.

Sometimes the evangelists do a really good job of watering down the gospel. Luke often puts a frame around the parables to steer us toward the interpretation that he wants us to make.

Today I want to hold up the parable as it was told by Jesus, and not be too quick to jump to an interpretation.

First Move: Two Unattractive Characters

There are two parts to this text: the frame and the parable. The frame is instruction by Jesus to the disciples about the need for persistent prayer. The parable is about a widow and a judge. Neither of the two characters is attractive. Let's focus on the parable rather than the frame.

We are introduced first to the judge. "A certain judge was in a certain city." We know by now that Luke likes to describe his characters this way: a certain man, a certain judge. It could be anyone.

A judge has a position of high honor. In 2 Chronicles 19:6-7, Jehoshaphat addresses judges and tells them:

Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the Lord; he is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you.

The duty of the judge is to maintain *shalom* among God's people. This is what the audience hearing the parable would have expected of the judge. But this judge defies their expectation. He does not fear God and he does not respect man. This is a breach of his duty. He is essentially unfit to hold the office of judge.

The portrait of the widow is also unsettling. A widow was one of the most vulnerable people in Israelite society. She could not inherit her husband's estate. That was divided between his brothers. The brothers then had an obligation to support the widow. That is a possible reason that she is in court—her brothers-in-law are neglecting their duty to support her. Yet this woman does not seem timid and dependent. Litigants in court tend to be deferential to the judge. Not the widow. She cries out in public to the judge to give her justice, and she doesn't preface her demand with an honorific title. The NRSV softens her demand; it translates it as: "Grant me justice against my opponent." It can be translated more literally as, "Grant me vengeance against my adversary." The traditional Greek word for justice is δικαιοσύνη. It means justice or righteousness. The parable uses a different word, ἐκδικέω. Its primary meaning is avenge or punish. We make the widow a sympathetic figure by saying that she asks for justice, but we don't know what her complaint is. We also tend not to imagine women as asking for violence. This is startling to the hearers of the Gospel. Jesus refused to defend himself when his own life was at stake and he commanded his disciples to turn the other cheek and love their enemies.

The woman harasses the judge. She keeps coming to him, making the same plea. It is like Groundhog Day. The judge can't get away from her.

The judge has an interior monologue, similar to the Prodigal Son, who comes to his senses while he is eating pig slop. The judge says, "Even if I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow is causing me trouble I will avenge her lest she keep coming to me and blacken my eye." A first-century audience would have heard a boxing metaphor and would have been shocked to hear it applied to a widow. Most translators soften it by translating "strike me under the eye" as "wear me out." This is a less obvious boxing metaphor, but it is still a reference to boxing. It is like the Rope-A-Dope strategy that Muhammad Ali used against George Foreman in the Rumble in the Jungle. Ali allowed Foreman to hit him with punches to his mid-section for several rounds. In the later rounds Foreman's arms got tired and he lowered his guard. Ali knocked him out in the eighth round. The widow is using Rope-A-Dope on the judge.

The judge grants the widow's request, not because he is convinced of the justice of her cause, but out of his own convenience. He wants to be rid of her. Don't we often do the same thing? It is easier just to give an obnoxious person what they want instead of arguing with them about it. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

We are not sure what to make of the parable. Is the widow a positive example? Should widows resort to violence to get what they want? Is the widow's persistence

a good thing? What are we to make of the judge? He seems to be totally self-interested.

This is typical of Jesus' parables. They are puzzles that we must play with in our minds to try to understand them.

Second Move: Dismantling Biblical Stereotypes

What could Jesus mean by telling this parable about two unattractive characters?

I found the most helpful commentator on this parable to be Amy-Jill Levine, who is both a New Testament scholar and an Orthodox Jew. She loves to challenge Christian scholars for misunderstanding Jews when they are interpreting Jesus' sayings.

Levine points out that several of the widows described in the Old Testament do not meet the classical stereotype of the poor, defenseless widow. We met one of them on Wednesday night two weeks ago. Tamar is the first widow described in the Bible. She married Judah's oldest son. He died, and Judah directed his second son to lie with Tamar so that she could get pregnant and have a son. He also died. Judah only had one other son, and he was still a young boy. Judah sent Tamar back to live in father's house until the youngest son came of age. It becomes clear to Tamar that Judah has no intention of allowing his third son to father a child with her, lest he suffer the same fate as the two oldest sons. Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and tricks Judah into sleeping with her. She has twin boys, one of whom becomes a direct ancestor of King David and Jesus. Is Tamar a helpless widow?

Ruth and Naomi: are they helpless widows? Ruth takes the initiative and goes to lie with Boaz on the threshing room floor so that he would marry her.

Widows in the New Testament were leaders in Paul's churches. There is a backlash against widows in some of the later letters in the New Testament. That is the basis for the household codes in the Pastoral Letters: wives' should submit to their husbands and women should not speak in church. The early church believed that widows had become too strong.

In the same way, the widow in Jesus' parable shatters the stereotype. She displays strength and cleverness and questionable motives, just as her Biblical predecessors did.

Luke takes part in the domestication of widows. The meaning of the parable, according to Luke, is that the disciples "need to pray always and not lose heart."

Levine objects. She says that if a tax collector can be righteous, a landowner generous enough to provide a living wage to everyone in the marketplace, and a judge neither God-fearing nor respectful toward men, "surely a widow can be vengeful."

We tend to read the parables with binary lenses. We presume that the widow's cause is just and that the judge models unrighteousness. We root for the widow because we are conditioned by Biblical stereotypes to see widows as helpless and abused. We also root for her because we do not like the judge.

Progressive scholars tend to see the judge as representing systemic evil and institutional corruption. The parable says that the judge doesn't fear God; it says nothing to indicate that the judge is corrupt, that he takes bribes. That fits the stereotypes of progressive scholars. They are reading their biases into the parable.

What if we get past binary thinking? We resist ambiguity and force the characters into being either good or evil. We want to believe that the widow is nonviolent and loves her enemies. Can we see her as a threat to the judge, who believes she is out to punch him in the eye? Is it possible to see both characters as morally ambiguous? Is it possible to see them as characters instead of as symbols for the injustice of society?

Levine suggests that Jesus is asking us to challenge the stereotypes. The parable says nothing about the widow's economic status and the nature of her lawsuit. Not all widows are poor and completely dependent on men. Not all widows are exploited. Just as a Samaritan can be a good neighbor, and a woman searching for a lost coin can be an image of God, and a rich man can be a fool.

Levine concludes: "Once we stereotype her, we can ignore the challenge of the parable, and so ignore the challenge to our stereotypes." Telling a widow in the church today that she is helpless and oppressed may not be good news. And it may not be accurate.

Third Move: Dismantling Progressive Stereotypes

We all agree that stereotypes are a bad thing. It is easy to talk about stereotypes made by people we disagree with. It is more challenging to address our own stereotypes. I would like to spend our remaining time together talking about stereotypes that progressives make. Physician, heal thyself.

Liberals helped create the environment that led to the Holocaust. Our theology made room in heaven only for Christians. Jesus was the key to getting into heaven. The Passion Plays in our churches at Easter depicted Jews as Christ killers.

Western Europe did not confine Jews to ghettos, as Eastern Europe and Russia did. But Western Europe had its own hatred of Jews. Jewish bankers were blamed for creating the society's financial troubles.

Progressives no longer hold these beliefs about Jews. Our stereotypes have morphed to other places.

Progressive populists now hold billionaires and multinational corporations responsible for economic stagnation. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, is the richest man in the world, and Amazon dominates retail sales. How many of us are Amazon Prime members? Mary and I are. I buy nearly my books and a lot of clothes through Amazon Prime. It is convenient. I can find exactly what I want for a low price and have it delivered in two days.

What about fossil fuel companies? We hear that they are destroying the environment. Yet how many of us drive SUVs or pickup trucks that get 21 miles per gallon? How many of us have cut back on air travel? When our church participated in the Climate March in downtown Oklahoma City a few years ago, the speakers demonized the oil companies. A minister was one of the speakers, and he was the harshest critic of the oil companies. He called them evil and greedy. He sounded more like a partisan activist than a minister of the gospel that talks about loving our enemies.

What about the people who work in the oil companies? The landmen, the division order clerks, the accountants, the secretaries and receptionists. Are they evil? Are they greedy?

I have worked as oil and gas attorney in Oklahoma City since 1982. It didn't used to be the Evil Empire. It helped drive the economy in Oklahoma. I can only think of one client that I have worked for that I would call evil, and that was the owner of an oil company who didn't care how his decisions affected his father. Most of the oil companies I have worked with are conscientious about dealing with surface owners and royalty owners.

Corporations do act in their own self-interest, and our economic system tends to reward economies of scale. And the fossil fuel companies and multi-national corporations have a lot of political power that needs to be countered.

Perhaps there are other contributing factors to economic stagnation. Global competition: the rest of the world is catching up to us. Automation: products are getting cheaper because they require less labor. If we deal with the complexity and ambiguity of the economy, it is harder to find scapegoats.

Walter Wink, a leading theologian of the last generation, wrote three books on *The Powers That Be*. The mantra that he repeated throughout the trilogy was, The Powers were created good, the Powers have fallen, the Powers must be redeemed. How many progressive activists follow that mantra?

Progressives also scapegoat individuals. When I pray about loving my enemies, I usually think of evangelicals as the enemy. We are usually on opposite sides of the political spectrum and the theological spectrum. Progressives stereotype evangelicals

as shallow, not too smart, mean and self-righteous. We may be slightly bitter. They have a lot more people in their churches than we do in ours.

Evangelicals are not of one mind about gay people. Mary and I met a few years ago with a couple whose child was in Mother's Day Out. They wanted to know what our religious beliefs were about gays. They were trying to understand. They went to a megachurch that was at an intermediate position. They taught that homosexuality is a sin, but the church should love gay folks and welcome them. This evangelical couple was not mean and self-righteous, they were loving and seeking understanding. They contributed several hundred dollars a month to our offering, even though they disagreed with our beliefs on homosexuality.

We also have some things in common with evangelicals: we share the same Bible, the same religious tradition, the same Christ and the same God. Those things could bring us together. Maybe we could enter into an ecumenical partnership with a Church of Christ. We might find that there are disciples [with a small D] in both churches.

Conclusion

We have to process a lot of information from the world we live in, and it is easy to make quick judgments and categorize things and people. Those quick judgments can be wrong. They force groups of people into little boxes, and people are more complex than that.

A sign of spiritual maturity is to move from a binary perspective—everything is good or bad, black or white, this or that—to a unitary perspective, where we see the connections between all things. Jesus had this kind of unitary perspective. He saw people as they really are.

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