

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

A WIDOW'S PLEA

Luke 18:1-8

Pentecost 20 (Proper 24)

Analysis by Ron Starenko

1Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lost heart. 2He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' 4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she will not wear me out by continually coming.'" 6And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

DIAGNOSIS: She Decries Injustice – Our Problem with God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *"Life Isn't Fair!"*

How often we have heard that complaint, "Life isn't fair"-even said it ourselves. No one is a stranger to such a lament. Minorities know it; Palestinians know it, the hapless in

Bangladesh know it; survivors of terrorist attacks know it; the victims in war-torn Iraq and the Sudan know it; survivors of the hurricanes of 2004 know it; crying children, grieving widows know it. Following the disaster of 9/11, one widow, speaking for many, cried out, "Life isn't fair!" She was angry. Who was the target of her anger? God perhaps? Though God is certainly not the unjust judge in Jesus' parable, our cries that life isn't fair are a veiled accusation that God is not just. Even though "all (God's) ways are just" (Deut. 32:4), we often find ourselves getting mad at God.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *"Where's God?"*

During World War II many prisoners in concentration camps suffered from what was called barbed-wire sickness, a catatonic state, revealing a failure of hope, an utter loss of heart. In the midst of such suffering, very often the human cry became an accusation, shared by the rest of the world, "Where is God?" When we are sorely tried, sometimes our human reaction is, "I can't believe in God anymore." Somehow we have the notion that God owes us, and when God doesn't seem to be around, our faithless hearts say, "Forget it." Widows weaken, too, as we all do during adversity, when our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears and we succumb to the temptation to blame God, whom we accuse of being unjust and uncaring.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *"What Chance Do We Have?"*

Now we have become judges of God and our trouble with God deepens. Does not our kicking against God further reveal that we are not right with God, that we do not have a heart for God, and therefore our accusing God becomes a way of making ourselves right and just? Do we imagine that by putting God on trial we could escape God's judgment? Who are we to deserve to be heard, when we are opposed to God, obsessed as we are with our goals and goodness and greatness? Widows, the likes of you and me,

don't have a chance, as our problem with God puts us on a collision course with a just God who turns out to be our "opponent" (v. 3) after all. And, for all our pleading, we don't have a prayer.

PROGNOSIS: She Pleads For Justice Nevertheless – The Solution from God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – S/He Hangs in There

How are we, then, "not to lose heart" (v. 1), as Jesus says? "Listen to what the unjust judge says" (v. 6), Jesus tells us, meaning that if an unjust judge finally gives in to a bothersome widow, "how much more" (cf. Luke 11:5-13) "will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night" (v. 7)? And how will God be "faithful and just" (cf. The "Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness" in The Lutheran Book of Worship), not against us, but for us? God will do it by one who was rejected by the world—"a widow" of God's own choosing. While we hardly deserve to be heard for all our faithless pleading, we are heard only through the Widow who pleads for our justice, our Lord Jesus Christ. She (he) pleaded from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). By hanging in there for us, his death reversing the judgment against us, mercy wins the day. Because the Father accepted the Son's plea, the Widow heard and vindicated, we are accepted and heard when we are overwhelmed by the injustices of life and even, yes, when we experience the silence and absence of God. Jesus suffered through it all for us, and now, raised from the dead, the victorious Widow that he is, he lives to intercede for all the saints. And even though the ultimate justice is delayed when all wrongs will be righted and our prayers answered in the resurrection of the just, we have the assurance that God's faithful, the "chosen" (v. 7-8), will be vindicated.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *She Wins*

Like Jacob, that patriarch of the faith, having had a wrestling match with God, “prevailed” (Gen 32:28). How persistent he was, having only a promise, the covenant passed down. He knew that it was enough for him to hold God to God’s word, which, as Martin Luther put it, was having Jesus Christ. In other words, having God on his side, for all the wrestling, like the widow in the text, Jacob could plead and be heard and blessed, come hell or high water. When all seems like darkness and silence, we, too, can claim the victory of Jesus in whom we have a clear word from God which gives us a heart to see beyond the injustices of life, even beyond God’s judgment, having a mercy and promise that will never fail. By our faith we have an answer to our plea that our heavenly Father will save us in our “time of trial” (Luke 11:4).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *She Does Justice*

So, the widow, now you and me, pleads for justice and gets mercy, which is one and the same. All of our enemies defeated in Jesus by God’s justice and mercy, we know God in a new way, as our gracious heavenly Father, no longer our opponent. As a result, we find courage and hope for our living in an unjust world. At the same time we are given the strength to obey our Lord who calls us “to do justice, and to love kindness” (Micah 6:8). What else is that than to take up the cause of the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, to answer their pleas for justice, to offer a vision of God’s presence in a darkling world with acts of mercy? What better way do we have to encourage those who are losing heart than to come to their aid with hearts of mercy in the image of Jesus? Indeed, the widow’s plea is answered in and through us as we move into the world carrying out our ministry against all odds (2 Tim. 4:5).