

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

GRANTING JUSTICE TO THE WIDOW

Luke 18:1-8

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose 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 may 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? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Editor's Note: The tricky element in this text is the word "justice." Arm yourself with the idea that there are two kinds of justice or righteousness-the justice of the law, on the one hand, and the justice of faith (in Christ), on the other-and be prepared to make use of this distinction in your reading of the text as a kind of double entendre. Luke is very keen on his use of this literary device. For example, v. 7 implies a coordination of both kinds of justices. God will grant to the chosen the justice of faith (whereby they are forgiven for

Christ's sake) and justice of the law (whereby they are vindicated vis-à-vis their oppressors). I hope my attempt to flesh out this delicate distinction makes sense.

DIAGNOSIS: The Justice of the Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Complaining without Ceasing*

Truth be told, very few people are like the widow (v. 3) Jesus describes in this parable. Indeed, Jesus wonders if there will be any like her at all when he comes again (v. 8). Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to imply that only a few people experience actual injustice like this widow did. On the contrary, everyone experiences some sense of injustice-even while millions of others experience gross injustice. Rather, the difference between the widow and most people, perhaps us included, is that we complain (as opposed to pray) without ceasing (cf. v. 1). To be sure, we complain about what the widow prays about: for example, the experience of injustice at the hands of the very "system of justice" (the duly authorized judge) that was created to maintain and establish justice. But unlike the widow, we complain about Life itself as ultimately unjust! For example, "Why did Widow Schmidt lose her husband to cancer-and along with him all the attending security that belonged to marriage-and Mrs. Jones did not?" Isn't it because the world is inherently unjust? And so, we complain without ceasing and with apparent self-justification.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Loss of Heart/Unfaith/Ceasing to Pray*

But there is also another sense in which very few people are like this widow. Rarely are people so persistent and tenacious as she is in promoting her own case. (Exactly what her sense of

justice is, its basis will be explored in the prognosis below.) No, unlike the widow, most people eventually “lose heart” (v. 1), that is, they come to concede to the belief that Life itself is unjust. Note-and this is a very important distinction-people do not concede their belief that they are just, what Luther called the *opinio iustitia*. That would come too dangerously close to repentance. Rather, what they concede is that the world IS inherently an unjust place and that they don’t get what they deserve. But now, let us be honest and name what this concession (that Luke calls the “loss of heart”) really is. Is it not a subtle way of accusing God, the creator and ruler of the world, of being unjust? And isn’t that the classical biblical description of unbelief? And isn’t that also the reason why people cease from praying (v. 1), if not complaining?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God’s Poetic Justice-the Boomerang Effect*

Granted, there is a place for complaining about the injustice that arises from the malefaction of human agents who are supposed to be God’s caretakers of justice. There is a kind of civil righteousness or justice in that complaint. But it is quite another thing to turn that complaint against God himself as though God himself is the source of injustice. With regard to that turning against God, Jesus is clear: God “will quickly grant justice to them” (v. 8). That is, God will rise up and quickly vindicate himself, giving the complainers their just desserts, declaring them “unjust.” Whether the “self-justifiers” (those who harbor the fallacious *opinio iustitia*) will acknowledge it or not, God not only WILL but IS giving them their justice desserts-now! And that’s more justice than they can stand. For when push comes to shove not only are all people the recipients of injustice, but all people are also the perpetrators of injustice. And as perpetrators their complaints boomerang on them. Indeed, that boomeranging effect is God’s

lawful justice at work in the world against them. For the lawful justice of God is rarely linear logic or straight forward prose. Rather, it is often what we call “poetic justice,” that strange and foreboding justice, to paraphrase Luther, “whereby God uses one injustice to boomerang and rectify another.” Woe to those who “lose heart,” who are blinded by their own opinio iustitia, who thereby ascribe injustice to God, only to have their accusation boomerang on them. The injustice they complain about is only the beginning of the justice they shall receive “when the Son of Man comes” (v. 8).

PROGNOSIS: The Justice of Faith

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Justice of Christ-the Boomerang Effect*

Yet, through the use of this parable, Jesus counsels us not to “lose heart” as we experience injustice. On the contrary, he urges us to pray to God not to complain against God; he encourages us to stand before God as though we are wholly justified before him, not to cower in his holy presence; he bids us to be confident that God will hear us and grant us whatever we need. How is that possible-especially, in light of the fact that we are not only the receivers of injustice but the perpetrators of injustice? The initial answer to that begins with Jesus himself. Jesus does the unthinkable. He takes the side of the complainers, not in the sense that he becomes a complainer against God with them, but that he becomes their shield against the boomeranging effect of God’s lawful justice upon them. Of course, the historical fulfillment of this compassionate act is the cross. On the cross, Jesus is attacked from all sides: As God he bears the “unjust” complaints of sinful humanity against God; as man he bears the “just deserts” that belong to perpetrators of “injustice.” At first glance, it appears that the justice of God’s law has won. Christ dies the death of the unjust complainers. But there is more. Christ rises

from the dead signaling also the victory of the unjust! The explanation is that in Christ a whole, new kind of justice has been established. In Christ, although the unjust die, yet shall they live-and live justly. This is a kind of justice that is based not on what the unjust do but what Christ does for them. His justice, his righteousness overrules the righteousness of the law. Indeed, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the justice of the law has been rendered "unjust," like the unjust judge in Jesus parable. In attacking Jesus, the Son of Man, the end-time judge, the law has in effect broken its own first principle. It has shown "no fear of God" and, thus, its own measure of justice has boomeranged against it, rendering it unjust. Christ (and his compassion for unjust complainers) now stands as the alternative, surpassing measure of the justice of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Justice of Faith*

Of course, the secret to any "system of justice" (old or new) has to do with the application of that justice. How does this new kind of justice become applied to the "unjust," the sinner? The (technical) answer is by faith and by imputation. By faith in Christ God grants (imputes) to the unjust the justice or righteousness of Christ as a gift. This is what the "just judge," the Son of Man, the ultimate, end-time judge says. Note closely the "prayer" of the widow. In the parable she is not complaining, but asking, pleading, "grant me justice against my opponent" (v. 3). Who is her opponent? It is twofold. It is her sinful, unjust self and the lawful justice of God that stands against her. How can this twofold opponent be overcome justly? Answer: by faith in Christ. That's why Jesus asks this all important question at the end of the text (v. 8): "when the [Son of Man] comes, will he find faith on earth?" To those who have no such faith they are left with the deadly, burning accusation

of the God's lawful justice. But to those who have faith in Christ, his justice or righteousness is granted (imputed) to them as a gift. That gift is enjoyed now as the forgiveness of sins and in the day to come as the resurrection unto eternal life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Praying without Ceasing*

Finally, this new kind of justice and its appropriation by faith has real benefits for Christian living in this world. It means first of all that believers will pray without ceasing about all manner of injustices, confident that God hears them and supports them. It means that believers can live in the paradox of complaint and confidence: they can complain about the pervasiveness of injustice in the world as an exercise of civil concern and do so in confidence that God is just and that God will execute justice accordingly to his promises. It means that believers can be patient and repentant in the face of injustice without losing heart, without giving up, without self-righteous illusions and utopian delusions. It means that believers can be a constant advocate for the victims of injustice even if those victims are found wanting by the strictures of the justice of the law. It means that believers have a real alternative to offer people who are caught in the web of injustice: the justice of Christ, theirs for the believing.