

Proper24, Year "C: [RCL]: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104;
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Title: The Persistent Widow

The following is a story not written by Sir Author Conan Doyle, but it a good, as well as instructive tale nonetheless:

It is that needing some time away from the office, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson decided to get out of town for a few days and so they went on a camping trip. And so, after a good meal cooked over an open fire they lay down for the night and were both looking up at the stars. Finally, Sherlock Holmes says to Watson, "Watson, look up and tell me what you see."

Watson said, "Ah, Holmes, I see an amazing panorama of countless stars," to which Holmes asked, "And what, my friend, does that tell you?"

Watson pondered for a moment and finally replied, "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets.

I also happen to observe that the planet Saturn is in the constellation Leo.

Given the position of the stars, I can also deduce with some confidence that the time is approximately midnight.

Theologically, I can see that God is omnipotent and that by comparison we are but small and insignificant creatures.

Meteorologically, I can predict that tomorrow will be a beautiful day.

And so after a moment of continued contemplation as if trying to take it all in Watson said to Holmes: Holmes, what does looking up into the night sky tell you?

Holmes replied, "Simply this, my dear Watson, someone has stolen our tent."

Often times, life can be a lot about perspective – a thing I not infrequently find myself repeating from this very pulpit. This morning is also such an occasion.

This parable that we just read – this parable told by Jesus to his disciples is most often referred to as the parable of the Unjust Judge. I guess I have a different perspective for you see I think that to refer to this story as the Parable of the Unjust Judge is not only not helpful, but quite frankly actually leads the reader or the hearer in a direction that is not intended. Rather, I would prefer to call this parable the parable of the Persistent Widow or maybe the parable of Divine Persistence.

A usual commentary on this parable wants to represent that the Judge in this story is God while the widow is a metaphor for one who is persistent in prayer and who finally, after much effort and nagging, gets what she wants and earnestly believes that she deserves. Well, that's fine, I think such an interpretation is, in fact, something of what Jesus would have us take away from this story, but it is by far not the end of what can be said about it.

One problem about calling this parable the Parable of the Unjust Judge has less to do with interpretation and more to do with the limitation of metaphor. That is, in this parable the judge is described as not only lazy, but also as one who has no fear of God and no respect for anyone. This is hardly a fitting description of the Almighty.

Such an interpretation would also have us understand God as one who is subject to being badgered or pestered into submission; maybe not unlike a child who pesters a parent into buying the cereal with the most sugar and the least nutritional value. Arguably, this also is maybe not the best image of God.

So, having recognized some of the problems with seeing God as so called Unjust Judge, let us turn our attention for the moment to the person of the widow – a thing I tend to think leads us a step closer to what Jesus would have us see and understand from this story. There are two things I would have us notice about the widow.

First, she is obviously persistent. Her persistence and tenacity are explicit. But the question is: What is she persistently seeking?

The answer is: She is seeking justice.

And what does the text tell us that she finally received?

Justice.

And what does Jesus say of God?

That God is the purveyor of justice.

We don't know the particulars of the widows' story. We are not told the particulars of the injustice she seeks to have corrected. But what we DO KNOW is that a widow in her time was extremely vulnerable and this vulnerability probably has something to do with the injustice to which she has been subjected.

For example, in Jesus' day, when a woman's husband died she did not even inherit her dead husband's estate. Rather, the estate passed to his eldest son and in the absence of a son, the man's brother would receive his estate. In the first instance she could hope that her son would take pity on her. In the latter case she could only hope that her brother 'n law would. But in either case she would be left penniless. She would not have had the power, influence, or wealth to assist her in the pursuit of her just cause. The *only thing* such a one would have in the pursuit of justice would have been the rightness, or maybe even the *righteousness* of her cause -- coupled, of course, with a healthy dose of chutzpah and tenacity on her part.

As something of an aside, but nonetheless an important thing to notice in this story, is that the widow seeks not retribution from her oppressor -- only justice. She understood justice not as a means of retribution but rather as a reversal of a wrong. We might be instructed in recognizing that this was also the understanding of justice held by Gandhi in his persistent pursuit of justice for the brown-skinned people of India. And this was also the orientation and was a matter of faith held by Martin Luther King, Jr., in his persistent pursuit of justice for his kinspeople. And it was also the perspective of Nelson Mandella and Rt. Rev. Desmond Tutu as they a movement to free their people from oppression.

This is the lesson and matter of faith behind the on-going struggle of wiser people everywhere in pursuit of justice and the means necessary to take their rightful place in the community-at-large.

And until the Kingdom of Heaven arrives fully blossomed the appeal for justice will continue to be the most powerful of prayers and prayer will be a powerful instrument in the pursuit of justice. I can say this for Holy Scripture purely oozes with the message that God is a God deeply concerned with and hates injustice. Which is why, of course, King could confidently and rightly declared that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

And so to begin to wrap up, I want to say that as the widow in this story is persistent so we are called to be persistent in our prayers for all that which is righteous. Whether our prayers be in the form of alleluia's or doxologies; petitions or intercessions; for ourselves or for others; personal or corporate; let us pursue them and offer them with gusto! That is the lesson of the persistent widow as was the message of Paul when he wrote to the congregation in Philippi saying,

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known.” [Phil 4:6-7].

Dear ones, the importance of prayer, the necessity of prayer is a thing all too easily ‘lost,’ forgotten, or neglected in this modern, fast-paced, distraction-filled world. It is more tempting than ever to drop out of conversation with God; to speaking with God and listening for God’s voice in our lives. There are indeed many “voices” vying for our attention, so many things to attend to, so many things we imagine are more important than nurturing our relationship with God, the Great Creator and lover of all souls.

We can be so much like the elephants I read about recently. Elephants who on parade through the streets of an Indian city during holy days would become a nuisance. That is, as the elephants ambled down the streets among the shops and vendors, their trunks would writhe restlessly from side to side, dipping into the stalls, searching for coconuts and bananas. To settle the elephants down, a knowledgeable trainer who knew and loved the elephants would give each elephant a bamboo stick to hold in its trunk. Remarkably, the moment the trunk wrapped itself around the bamboo stick, the elephant would settle down, no longer restless, no longer pilfering bananas. Rather the elephants would walk through the narrow, crowded streets holding their heads high, no longer distracted by the goodies along the way.

A wise one once said, “Your mind is very much like the elephants trunk. When you enter into prayer and meditation, the restlessness falls away.” We each do well to find our own bamboo stick and undistracted time with God. This too is very much the message given us by the Divine Widow of the parable

Finally, not only is God always and everywhere available and anxious to *hear us*, but God is always and everywhere *seeking us*.

Thomas Keating will say, “The ‘Divine Widow’ keeps pounding on the door of our hearts day after day, but not unlike the indifferent judge, we all too often try to put her off.” But God keeps persisting. If we but stop, or at least hesitate in our comings in and our goings out, we find that God is there – in people, in events, thoughts, feelings, memories. The persistent still, small voice is ever present, insisting on being heard.

Holy and gracious God: May we not be indifferent to your voice. Rather may we have ‘ears’ to hear – maybe even, by the grace of God, ears as big as those of an elephant.

Amen.