

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Luke 18:1-8

The Judge & the Widow

I'm sure you've had the experience of feeling unheard – by people, by institutions, even by God. Jesus tells a story about a woman who feels like this but refuses to be ignored...

There's this corrupt judge who has no conscience. He's only concerned for himself. Then one day, a widow appears in his courtroom. She's poor and powerless – not the sort of person he would've taken notice of. She's got no money to bribe him, and she can't afford a lawyer to represent her. So, she speaks up for herself. "Grant me justice against my opponent." But even though the judge won't give her the time of day, she persists and refuses to be silent. Finally, the judge grows tired of the woman's badgering. She's a tough character. The Greek compares the widow's in-your-face attitude to giving a black eye. There's no way she's going to remain a victim. To spare himself further hassle, the judge decides not only to hear her case, but to also grant her justice so he can have a quiet life.

Luke says this story is about not losing heart when it comes to praying. But is this what prayer is meant to be like? I hope not – though some might say it's their experience of prayer. But it's not what Jesus has in mind. And is God like the judge? No way! Because God is just and compassionate – and prayer isn't a matter of badgering God until God finally gets fed up with the sound of our voice and gives us what we want. Rather, Luke is suggesting, if even a corrupt judge can be worn down by persistence, how much more will a just and loving God respond to our cries?

In our prayer life, we do a lot of asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting. Sometimes that can lead to deep frustration, even anger, as it feels God isn't listening. I suspect many people have trouble with prayer because they think that praying is about telling God what God already knows, or persuading God to do what God wouldn't do otherwise, or somehow changing God in some way or another. But it seems to me that prayer is quite the opposite. The primary effect of prayer isn't on God, but on us. God's love is unconditional, God's justice is perfect – God's compassion is without limit. God knows our needs even before we do. It's not God who needs to change, but us. We need to line up with God's scheme of things, and prayer is largely about how that comes about. When I pray, what I'm seeking to do is align myself with God and God's ways. I'm seeking to allow myself to become more Christ-like. I'm saying that I don't want to live in my own little world – in a world that's centred on me. Instead, I'm opening myself up to God's way of seeing things, to God's priorities. As Rowan Williams puts it, prayer is about 'being where God is.' It's not about changing God, but about being changed in God's presence

Let's take another look at the judge. He's unscrupulous, without conscience or respect for his fellow humans. He has no fear of God. He lives in a closed world all of his own. If we look at ourselves, we see that's a picture of us – hopefully not all the time – but it's certainly part of us. There are times when we live in a self-centred world – refusing to allow God to have a say in what we do and become. When we're like that, we're leaving no room for God, and no room for other people. It's a world in which we're the sole inhabitant. The judge represents our egotistic and self-seeking state. He's a picture of that element of us, and the purpose of our prayer is to challenge him and help him change – to get him to do justice and to act compassionately.

But there's another way of viewing this parable. What if the widow isn't us – but God?

God is constantly attempting to break into our closed world, drawing us into relationship, getting us to act justly, and making us recognise what our relationships with God and others demand of us. God

is like the widow – persistent, never giving up, calling us again and again to be something new, to do something better.

Maybe we can see God acting like that with us. Perhaps God has been persistent in calling us to know Jesus more deeply – to discover a new dimension to the Christian walk. Perhaps we hear God calling us to a new or deeper commitment. Or, maybe, it's God saying over and over, "I love you." In whatever way God calls to us, the common experience is that God is unrelenting and doesn't give up on us. We may not always want to hear God's call because we've got our own agenda. But God keeps calling. God is so much like the persistent widow.

Speaking of the widow, remember that what she was so persistent about was justice. God calls us to act justly. The prophet Micah said: 'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' That's the promise we made at our baptism – the promise to follow and serve Christ – to seek to love our neighbour as ourselves, to strive for peace and justice, and to proclaim by word and action the Good News of God in Christ. In the week ahead how might God be calling us to strive for justice and peace? Where is God calling us to be persistent in justice today – in our city, our relationships, our church? The widow was persistent in her demands for justice, and so must we. And when we do, we behave in a God-like way. We make ourselves available, and God uses us.

To the day we die, God will continue to call us. We'll never arrive at the place where we can say, 'Now I've done it all. God will ask no more of me.' God's call may be different at different times in our lives, but there's always more. At times we listen well, at other times not so well, but God's voice is never stilled. It's persistent, and each time we hear and respond, we become more the person God calls us to be.

May we be persistent in prayer – being where God is – bold in justice – and open to God who never gives up on us

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