

“Divine Persistence”

LUKE 18:1-8

Rev. Denise W. Ingram

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As a child, I heard the stories in scripture as one dimensional. I mistakenly thought after you learned the story’s “one truth” you had gleaned all you could from it and were free to move on. One could always revisit a story but did so without expecting to learn anything new. Later in life, I began to understand that the Word of God is living and active and that there are a multitude of truths to glean from each story. As we change and the circumstances of our lives change, we revisit familiar scriptures only to discover another truth emerging. Today’s scripture is one of Jesus’ parables and it is a tricky one! Luke’s gospel is the only gospel that mentions it. Matthew, Mark and John do not. I do not know why. It may be because the parable seems to raise more questions than it answers. Rather than tiptoe around this parable, what if we were to trust God and engage this parable expecting to see yet another truth for our lives? Read Luke 18:1-8.

Jesus tells a story. Once upon a time there was an unjust judge and a poor widow. Jesus’ original audience knew what judges were supposed to do and how they were supposed to behave. It was a judge’s job to settle disputes fairly—justly--and keep the harmony in the community. The Jewish law, the Torah, describes in great detail how judges were responsible to protect the rights of the poor—widows, orphans and foreigners in the land. But the judge in Jesus’ story is unjust and uncaring. Jesus describes the judge as a man “who neither feared God nor had respect for people” (Luke 18:2). Jesus is not being judgmental--just stating facts. The judge is far from compassionate and he knows it. The judge says about himself, “I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone” (Luke 18:4). He has power and is accountable to no one – not even God and certainly not to the people. He does not need anyone.

Then Jesus says “there is this widow.” Right away Jesus’ hearers would know the expected outcome—by law—for this widow. Any God-fearing judge would feel obligated to follow the Torah and take good care of her. This widow needs the law to protect her because she suffers prejudice in that society in three ways. As a

woman in a patriarchal society, she is severely restricted. As a widow in that society, she has no male advocate which deprives her of legal protection. Added to this, the judge is not rendering a just judgment for her. Any God-fearing judge would take care of this widow, but that is not this judge, according to Jesus. The judge ignores her pleas for justice but the widow is not going to take “no” for an answer. Day in and day out, she keeps returning to the judge pleading for justice. Perhaps it got to the point where “grant me justice, grant me justice” from this woman was the last thing at night and the first thing in the morning this judge heard. As he left for work in the morning he heard “grant me justice, grant me justice” from this widow. As he entered the courtroom “grant me justice against my opponent.” As he left the courtroom “grant me justice, grant me justice.” As he went to the golf course “grant me justice, grant me justice.” As he left the golf course “grant me justice, grant me justice.” When he went home at night “grant me justice against my opponent, grant me justice.” Did you see what a pain this widow was?

To gain some peace and quiet for himself—still putting his own well-being first—the judge grants justice to this woman. Despite his lack of integrity, he gives in and gives the widow what she wants.

Jesus tells this parable and says that the parable is about prayer. That is how prayer works, Jesus says. And there are many who would argue that God is like the mean, unjust judge and we are like the poor, powerless widow. Apparently, to get anything from God we must wear God down with our prayers. We have to besiege God day in and day out with our cries for justice or healing or employment or an upturn in the economy until God is worn out and gives us whatever we are asking for.

Of course, that interpretation is completely wrong. Let me say that again . . . that interpretation is completely wrong. We know from scripture that God has special concern for those in need. Within scripture itself, God has put down laws to ensure the well-being of widows, orphans, the poor, the outcasts and the stranger. God is so not like the unjust judge. God does not need to be worn out by our begging for justice to be done. God is the exact opposite of the unjust judge.

So if God is not like the unjust judge where is God in this story? Who is who in this parable? What if God is the widow? Hang in there with me on this. No, that can't be . . . God is powerful and this widow is powerless. Besides the widow is female? And yet she is so much

like God. Look at her, armed with nothing but persistence, not domination and might, she is constantly seeking justice. She reminds me of our persistent God who continually seeks us out even when we repeatedly give God “no” for an answer. God who does not give up on us, even as we dismiss, deny or distance ourselves from God. God does not quit on us. God persists in seeking us out.

Throughout scripture the story is of God seeking us out, going the extra mile. Initially, to get people’s attention, God spoke through the prophets. When people turned a deaf ear to the prophets, God came to live as one of us, in flesh and blood among us. Armed with divine persistence, God keeps on seeking us. God’s love never ends. God’s love is as persistent as the widow in this story.

If God is the widow where do we find ourselves in the story?

Several years ago the film, Hotel Rwanda was released. It was the horrendous, but true, story of what happened in Rwanda in 1994, when the powerful Hutu majority beginning a systematic slaughter of the Tutsi minority. One writer would later call that massacre "the fastest and most efficient killing spree of the 20th century." In one hundred days, the Hutus killed 800,000 Tutsis. The film tells the story of that horror through the person of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, a Hutu who made a promise to protect his Tutsi wife and the family he loved and ended up finding the courage to shelter and save over 1,200 people by hiding them in the luxury hotel he managed.

As the violence escalated, Paul initially protested there was nothing he could do, but his hesitation soon changed to determination. As seminary professor Alan Culpepper has said? "To those who have it in their power to relieve ... distress ... but do not, the call to pray day and night is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of their lives." Paul began to see the horror and feel shame. As his conscience prevailed, he acted to save as many lives as he could.

About midway through the story, as the slaughter of the Tutsi people escalated in Kigali, Western reporters began to capture scenes of the genocide on tape. Paul was heartened a bit, because he assumed the broadcast of such images would prompt immediate Western intervention. When a skeptical Western reporter expressed doubt, Paul was dumbfounded. "How can they see that and not intervene?" he asked. But the reporter had seen it all before. "More

likely," he responded, "people will see the footage, say 'Isn't that horrible?' and then go right on with their dinners."

If this parable is a mirror for our lives, then the face we see in the mirror is that of the judge, isn't it? The one who, as Jesus said, "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Isn't that who we are in this story? That's not a very flattering way to read the parable, to be sure. Who wants to be characterized as an unjust judge? But in the parable, the judge does eventually reach the tipping point, and even if it is more from self-interest and not from the best of motives, does grant the widow what she wants. What she wants, of course, is justice and a fair shake. It is what the outcasts of the world most often want. And we know - from reading scripture and from listening to Jesus - it is what God wants for them as well.

Maybe the good news in this story is that God is like the widow—persistent and unrelenting. God has not given up on us even when we have acted as if we "neither feared God nor had respect for people."

Like the unjust judge who does the right thing—even if not for the right reason--maybe there is hope that WE will grant what God wants for God's children. Maybe that is what this parable has to teach us about prayer. What was it Alan Culpepper said, "To those who have it in their power to relieve ... distress ... but do not, the call to pray day and night is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of their lives."

Prayer is about our behavior reflecting the desires of God's heart. Even if we do not do it for the "right reason." Even if our own self-interest is involved.

Maybe there is hope for us. I believe there is. More importantly, God's persistence of us demonstrates God believes there is. Thanks be to God! Amen.