

The 19th Sunday After Pentecost – October 19, 2025

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On the surface this parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge seems like a tidy little story.

There are only two characters in it. Let's take a closer look at them.

First, there is the judge. We know the judge was not a Jewish judge. All ordinary Jewish disputes were taken before the elders, and not into the public courts. If, under Jewish law, a matter was taken to court, there were always three judges, not one. This judge was one of the paid magistrates appointed either by Herod or by the Romans. Such judges were notorious for their greed and corruption. Unless a plaintiff had influence and money to bribe his or her way to a verdict, a plaintiff had no hope of ever getting their case settled.

Second, there is the widow. The widow was the symbol of all who were poor and defenseless. A widow at that time was not at all like what we normally think of a widow today. Widows were an especially vulnerable group in biblical times. A widow was dependent on a brother of her husband or a close family member to support her. If she did not have such support, she would most likely be reduced to begging or even prostitution. It was obvious that she, without resources of any kind, had no hope of ever extracting justice from such a judge. But she had two weapons—persistence and voice.

With only two characters and a few short verses, this parable seems easy to interpret. Right? But beware! There is a trap. The trap lies in our modern tendency to be too literal. By that I mean, we tend to miss the

imaginative aspects of parables and instead apply a strict formula to them in our interpretation. We do not live at a time when parables are commonly used to make a point.

If we take this parable with such a modern interpretation, it goes something like this: the judge is God, and we are the widow. So, like the widow we need to pray incessantly if we want to get what we want from God. Keep at it, God will eventually give in. Isn't that what the parable seems to imply? This way of interpreting parables, treats them as allegories – a literary device that uses events, characters, or objects to represent abstract ideas or concepts. That is not the same as a parable. A parable is a short story that uses familiar events to illustrate a religious or ethical point.

Look what an interpretation of this parable as an allegory does to our faith: it paints God as hard hearted and our constant prayer like water dripping on the stone heart of a reluctant God, hoping to eventually wear God down on our behalf. Remember too that the judge in the parable is unjust – making it even more dangerous to allegorize this parable, lest God take on the features of this judge in our imaginations.

If God gets so misrepresented then we, who are praying earnestly and even desperately for something, are made to feel alone, with no one on our side against the seeming reluctant God. If this is what we understand, then we have created a "strange" God indeed! Certainly not the God of Jesus' words and actions.

Even if we didn't have the citation telling us that this is a parable from Luke's gospel, we could easily guess its authorship. The parable has the signs

of a Lucan tale for again we hear his often-repeated themes about the poor, women and prayer.

A widow was especially vulnerable if the responsible males were indifferent to her welfare or worse, had defrauded her. In such situations a widow would have recourse to a civil judge who was supposed to protect the rights of widows and the poor. But the judge to whom our widow turns has no regard for her plight and, we are told, "neither feared God nor did he have any respect for anyone." What chance would she have against a judge like this who disregards the basic commandments about God and neighbor? The cards are stacked against her and things look pretty grim for her ever getting her due.

But this is no ordinary widow! She confronts the judge using the only things she has on her side – her voice and her persistence. What she wants is justice, but from a judge who is not in the least bit interested in giving it to her. The only recourse she would normally have had is not at all interested in her just cause. But by her persistence she wears down the judge who finally gives in to her.

There are a couple of important elements in today's parable that we tend to overlook. The first one is that we are not told what the widow specifically wanted. We are only told that she wanted "justice against my opponent." And second, we do not know what the judge gave her. We are only told that the judge decided to "grant her justice." That tells us that the subject of her demand was not the focus of the parable. So, what is the focus? The answer is obvious, isn't it? In one word: justice.

So, what does "justice" mean?

In the Bible, “justice” encompasses moral rightness, fairness, and the upholding of God's standards, reflecting God’s character and authority. Justice is a prominent theme in both Old Testament and New Testament scriptures, which contain many calls for justice. We cannot avoid the use of such words and messages, even if they are politicized today, if we are serious about studying scripture and understanding its meaning.

Biblical justice is not merely a legal concept, as we ordinarily think of it today. It also embodies moral righteousness and divine order. Biblical justice is associated with fairness. Justice is the quality of doing what is right and the idea of making things right. Justice has to do with conduct in relation to others. Just behavior accords with what is morally right and fair, highlighting the importance of treating others with fairness and compassion. And that is key to this parable.

The widow’s plight calls to mind those who are deprived of justice in our own society. As next year’s elections draw closer, whose voices are going to be heard by both politicians and voters in November? Whose interests will be at the top of the list? Will the voices of the poor and powerless be shouted by individuals and special interest groups who have more financial or voting power? Most often the poor, minorities, immigrants, homeless, infirmed, and aged are not first on the minds of those running for office, or those casting votes.

If we listen, we can hear the widow’s voice in another way. Now she is speaking for those in our society who are not heard – despite their just and desperate need. Who will influence state and the federal governments when

decisions are made about food assistance, or health care access and affordability? Who will influence decisions about tax rates and tax breaks? Who will influence decisions about housing for the homeless and veterans?

Picture the widow standing among those disenfranchised and hear her voice: "Render a just decision for [us] against [our] opponent," she says. See what this does to the simple parable of a widow and an unjust judge? It is not merely the widow's voice you hear demanding justice.

And so, if you are looking for an image of God in this parable and you don't find it in the judge, is there not another possibility? Consider an approach offered by New Testament scholar and professor Barbara Reid. She suggests finding the God-like figure in the widow, the one who persistently pursues injustice, denouncing it until justice is achieved. This interpretation is consistent with the words and actions of Jesus and as found in the New Testament message that power is found in weakness. A conclusion we would draw for ourselves then is that if this is the God in whose image we are made, then we too should tirelessly pursue justice even if it is against more powerful forces than we can muster.

Even though we believe that God is not against us, unlike the unjust judge, and that God will secure the rights of God's chosen, we may struggle with the fact that much in our world is unjust, especially for the disenfranchised. We pray for things to be put right and even pray that we can help make them so. Yet often conditions don't improve. Sometimes they even get worse.

That may even make us want to despair of ever seeing things righted. We may be tempted to cease our effort and quit our prayers. "What's the use?" we

lament. Even when things improve a bit there still is an enormous mountain of wrongs to address – in our homes, church, community and world. We feel our efforts are puny and so we are tempted to withdraw back into our private world saying, "What difference can I make?"

But Jesus tells us we are to be persistent in prayer because he knows that it will be easier for us to pray in difficult times if we have the discipline of regular prayer. Jesus acknowledges how serious the issues are, how powerful the forces against us are, and concerned about the effects even on his disciples. In the parable we heard him ask, "But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" This is not an idle or speculative question, but one that is based on the experiences of the church from its beginnings: disciples have hard work and prayer to do until the Lord returns.

I admit that it can be difficult for me to keep praying for change to the way the poor and marginalized people are neglected around the world. I think of the thousands still suffering hunger, thirst and medicines in Gaza even though there finally is a cease fire agreement in place. And the tens of thousands struggling in Sudan where the greatest humanitarian crisis now is located. And those living in fear of bombings and missiles in Ukraine. And I think of those in our country who do not have adequate food and those without access to basic health care. We are over two weeks into a government shut down that is adversely affecting countless Americans. We have the resources to end the shut down and restore order, but our leaders in both parties lack the will, courage and moral conviction to do so.

As Christians, we have a duty to speak truth to falsehood. In a sense, to be the “widow” for our times. I am not advocating for any political party or

official. The controversy and anger, the distrust and lack of civility, is much greater than any one individual or party. It is in times like these when we remember the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the many martyred by the Nazis. He warned us about this. He wrote: *“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil... Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”*

Paul Tillich, one of the most influential theologians, once wrote that the opposite of faith is not doubt—it is despair. Despair that nothing can change. Despair that we are powerless. But Tillich also wrote of the “courage to be,” the audacity to affirm life, dignity, and hope even when the systems around us are collapsing.

As practicing Christians, we believe that the Jesus Way is a different way. It is a way of being rooted in love, creativity, interdependence, and awe. In this view, the sacred is not confined to flags or podiums or stunts. It lives in the dignity of every human being.

We can promote the dignity of every human by being the voice of the widow. We, like her, can seek a just decision on behalf of the marginalized who have no voice of their own. Let us join our voices with the voice of Jesus spoken through the widow. Let us bring justice by loving our neighbors and doing good for those around us, especially the poor and marginalized. We do the work of bringing justice through our love and persistence.