

JUSTICE

TEXT: Luke 18:1-8

Jesus was not a big fan of judges and he told a number of parables that depicted them in a bad light. I think we have a somewhat greater esteem for judges today. Judge Judy is not my favorite, but there are times when I have appreciated her wit and sarcasm. But there is one judge that stands out for me as head and shoulders above others. Well, not in physical stature, but in respect and appreciation for her quick mind, clear thinking and knowledge and respect for the law. RBG, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, for me, shows what a good judge should be.

Not all of our justices are readily recognized, but in June of this year when RBG attended a Broadway production of “What the Constitution Means to Me”, when spotted in the audience she received a standing ovation from the rest of the audience. Still active on the bench at 83 and always fighting for the rights of women, she is one of the most respected people in our country.

Well, I’m afraid that the judge in Jesus’ story today did not earn any points in Jesus’ scorecard. Today Jesus introduces us to a judge who neither fears God nor respects people. The un-respected people are represented here by a widow whose relentlessness is so bothersome to the judge that she ends up receiving the justice she demands. And the unfearred God will, by the end of the parable, eclipse the judge who does not fear him.

We have a tale here of justice demanded, justice denied, justice demanded again, justice deferred, justice demanded once again, and, finally, justice redeemed. After Luke introduces us to the judge, he invites us to meet a widow. Luke mentions a number of widows in the ministry of Jesus. From those references, we might certainly characterize them as among the vulnerable, the ones in whom Jesus takes a particular interest. But in addition to being vulnerable, widows also appear as prophetic, active and faithful. We certainly remember the widow who gives her last coin as not only vulnerable, but also a

model of faithful generosity. The first widow of the Gospel is Anna, a prophet who spreads the good news of Jesus' birth. In his first sermon at Nazareth Jesus mentions the widow of Zarephath, who feeds Elijah from her meager supplies in a famine and whose son is returned to life by the prophet, an act Jesus replays in the raising of the only son of the Widow of Nain.

All of these appear only in Luke's Gospel, including the widow of our current parable, who is persistent, active, and forceful enough to get the justice she demands even from an utterly unjust judge, and who finally, by implication, is included among the chosen ones of God.

While the parable is framed by references to prayer and faith, the emphasis is on justice and how it figures in the confrontation between the vulnerable justice-seeker and the unjust power-holder. This strange story of a nagging widow who pesters a judge for justice may be hard for us to understand in the 21st century. But in Jesus' society not everyone was allowed a day in court. Women's behavior was extremely limited, much as the women of Afghanistan during the recent Taliban oppression. As a woman with no man to speak for her, she would have been walled behind her veil and widow's weeds. Effectively silenced, the very setup of this story Jesus is telling would have evoked interest and bemusement in his listeners.

So as we read this parable, with even our modern gender and power stereotypes, we tend to assume that the judge in the story is God, which would make us the poor widow. But wait. Who judges? Who cares neither for God nor for people? That would be us. And who continually demands that we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God? Sorry, we don't get the high ground here, denying our privilege, pretending we're faithfully imploring God with our persistent quest for justice. We're the ones deaf to the cries of the poor.

It is so easy for us to read this passage and imagine that God is the judge and we are the ones pleading for justice. But in what way is God like the unjust judge?

God comes in the voice of the vulnerable, the easily ignored, while we in our arrogance easily ignore these voices. It can be disconcerting that in this story the ball is in our court, not God's. The demand has been made, over and over. Jesus warns us: God can outlast us.

God is the good judge. God is not like the unjust judge in the story who will, eventually relent to the persistent petitions of the widow. God may to some seem like an unjust judge, but God's actions are just and God will deliver justice in due time. The parable tells us that as believers we should pray and petition without ceasing and not lose heart, confident that God's justice will in time prevail.

The parable ends with Jesus asking, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Why should the Son of Man not find faith on earth? Perhaps there is doubt in Jesus' question because it is very difficult to keep praying in trust to a loving parent, when every circumstance of our lives seems intractable and horrific. How do we keep trusting for "justice, liberation, wholeness, and cure" when there is no obvious way out? It is here that the widow becomes our teacher. The widow has no rights. She in fact did not have access to the judge, but that did not let her give in to bitterness; it did not temper her trust. She kept right on calling, trusting despite all evidence to the contrary that there would be a breakthrough in her hopelessness.

She believes in crying out to God; she longs for the world to be different. And somehow the calling helps. It helps even if nothing changes. I believe it is far more consoling to have a God who feels the pain with me and who longs for a better world than to have a MacGyver God who fixes everything at my beck and call. It would seem that, for Jesus, faith doesn't fix things as much as it gives us the capacity and the courage to bear the unbearable.

It is very appropriate that this story is told of a poor widow. She represents a behavior, but she also represents the poverty and vulnerability which is the point of the parable's message. The story has been shaped in the cruelty of exploitation and the arbitrary abuse of power. It belongs in the world which Jesus is addressing and it belongs in our world today. Jesus is reading the signs in the wounds of the people. We know that the corrupt judge in our story exists even today. The parable encourages those suffering injustice to continue their complaints and calls for justice. Sometimes it takes extreme even socially unacceptable behavior to effect change. The Bible persistently insists that God gives special attention to those who are most vulnerable; therefore, we should persist in our complaints, even to the point of embarrassing the powers that be in order to induce change.

There are good judges and bad judges in every age and in every country. And there are justices that stand for all that is good and right in the sight of God. Some of them even stand out in other areas of life. In November of 2016 Notorious RBG (you all know who that is) exchanged her ceremonial black robes for feathers and tulle as she made her debut with the Washington National Opera. And while her role wasn't exactly soaring oratory told in song – she had a speaking role – this 83-year old Justice stunned the audience during opening night of the opera's performance of "The Daughter of the Regiment", an 1840 operatic rom-com by Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti.

"It's amazing", she said, "that I was on an opera stage, because when I was in grade school the class was separated into robins who sang out and sparrows who mouthed the words – I was a sparrow". The classical music critic for the Washington Post said the Justice's performance stole the show. Again, her performance was enough to spark another prolonged ovation. "The house roared", the critic noted. What a shame that the judge in our parable could not move the people to such heights of acclaim.