

THE UNJUST JUDGE

Luke 18:4 "But later (the unjust judge) said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"

One of the things I frequently heard as the parent of a small child, when denying one of their requests, and which is something that I suspect that all of you who are parents have probably heard as well, was that familiar but troubling two word phrase, "But why?" For no matter how one answered that question, the follow-up response was always the same, another "But why?" My child could continue on and on and on sometimes, until in exasperation, I declared something like "Because I say so!" as though that would finally answer the complaint. But frequently thereafter, the child would continue the refrain with another "but why do you say so?"

Clearly this kind of pestering of someone to get what you want is nothing new. In today's Gospel, Jesus gives an illustration of a similar story, where Jesus seems to be encouraging his disciples to behave with God in just such a similar exasperating fashion. Luke does not tell us exactly what the widow's complaint was, because that's not important to the story, though it is not hard to guess. Since she is described as a

widow, her case probably concerns her dead husband's estate. Under Jewish law she could not inherit it, it would go straight to her sons or her brother-in-laws, but she would be allowed to live off of it, unless someone was trying to cheat her out of it. The fact that she is standing alone in the street in this parable is a pretty good indicator that none of the men in her family is on her side. If she had any protectors left, they would have kept her home, and they would have gone about things in a more civilized fashion. No son wants his mother hanging out the dirty family laundry in public. No brother-in-law wants his brother's widow disgracing the family name in the village square.

But there is no holding back this widow, and as the unjust judge finds out, she is quite capable of taking care of herself. Remember that this is not a respectable judge. By his own admission, he has no fear of God and no respect for anyone else. Maybe he thinks that makes him a better judge, more impartial and all of that, or maybe he has sat on the bench long enough to know how complicated justice really is. However it happened, he feels very well-protected and secure in his position. God does not get to him; and people do not get to him, he says, but oddly this widow gets to him --- at least partially because she throws a mean punch.

We cannot hear the humor in the English translation, but in Luke's original Greek version, the judge uses a boxing term for

the widow. He declares "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out with *continued blows under the eye.*" That's what the Greek literally says. Thus the judge's motivation in responding to the widow is perhaps not justice, as much as it is pride. He does not want to walk around town with a black eye and have to make up stories about how he got it. For anyone who has seen this widow nipping at him like a mad dog day after day will know exactly where he got it. Since he cannot stand that idea, he grants her request, but mostly to save face.

"Listen to what the unjust judge says," Jesus tells his disciples. This is the part Jesus wants us to pay attention to. Won't God do the same for you? If you too cry out both day and night, will God delay long in helping you too? Or ---- when the Son of Man comes, will he find no faith on earth?

So then we have this woman who found herself all alone and without anyone to help her, but she did not lose heart. She knew what she wanted and she knew who could give it to her. Whether he gave it to her or not was beyond her control, but that did not matter to her. She was willing to say what she wanted, out loud, day and night, over and over, whether she got it or not, because saying it, was important in revealing who she was. It was how she

declared the shape of her heart, and while there may have been plenty of people who were embarrassed by her or felt sorry for her for exposing herself like that; there must have been some kind of self-affirmation going on here. How exhilarating perhaps it was for her to stop trying to phrase things just the right way, to be polite or to be politically correct, to stop going through all the proper channels, and stop acting grateful for whatever scraps life dropped on her plate. There were no words for the relief she felt when she finally threw off all her shame, her caution, her self-control and went straight to the source to say exactly what she wanted. "Give me justice! She yelled at the judge. Do your job! Answer me now or answer me later, but I am here. And I am coming back every day and every night ---- forever --- until you deal with me!

As some of you know, petitions like that can wear our hearts right out, if we're not careful --- especially when there is no sign on earth that God has heard, much less answered, our prayers. We can only knock so long at a closed door before our hands hurt too much to go on. We can only listen to ourselves speak into the silence so long before we start to wonder if anyone else is there. When that happens, when the pain and the doubt gang up on us to the point that we start feeling dead inside, then we are in trouble, because we are, as we say, 'losing heart.' That is the

phrase Jesus uses, and he does not want it happening to his disciples. That is why he told them this parable about their need to pray always and to not lose heart.

For we all know that superficial prayers whispered just before we fall asleep at night turn out to be less painful than real prayers from the heart; and no prayers at all turn out to be the least painful of all. Don't ask and we won't be disappointed. Don't seek and we won't miss what we don't find. As for that growing deadness we feel where our hearts used to be, well, we will just have to get used to that. Isn't it better to feel nothing inside, than to feel pain? Or is it?

What the persistent widow knows is that the most important time to pray is when your prayers seem meaningless or impossible. If you don't go throw a few punches at the judge, what are you going to do? Take to your bed with a box of Kleenex? Forget all about seeking justice? No! No, the widow says. Day by day by day, we are going to get up, wash our faces, and go ask for what we want! We are going to trust prayer, regardless of what comes of it, ***because the prayer itself gives us life***, the prayer itself helps identify who we are and what we want.

So who are we, and what do we want? We want justice, I tell you! We want peace on earth and goodwill among mankind! We want the hungry fed, and the homeless housed! We want the sick and suffering cared for! We want to know why it is not being done

already! And we will respond to every pat answer given to us with the refrain of childhood innocence, "but why?" And we are not to going to stop until we get what we want; we are going to keep coming back to God and to each other day after day and night after night until our prayers are answered, until we get what is right, until God's will is done here on earth as it is in heaven!

In the end, our prayers keep us engaged with what matters most to us, with the very values and meaning of our lives. The alternative is to lose heart and become dead inside; and many people today have sadly chosen that path, because it is less painful. But I beseech you to keep praying. For our prayers help reveal and declare and establish who we are ultimately, and whose we are, and what's important in life, so that in the end, by our persistent prayers, we do NOT lose our hearts, but we gain them.

AMEN.