

From time to time our grandchildren stay with us for a few days. A few years ago, when our granddaughter, Vivian, was five years old, she loved to run, as most children do. And, when she stayed with us, she would continually run through the house with Ken chasing her. She would start at the front door, run past the kitchen and dining room, run through the living room, run around the table in the three-season room, and then head back, running through the living room, past the kitchen and dining room and back to the front door, where she would start in all over again. As she persistently ran this course, she kept saying, “Vivian never gives up, Vivian never gives up!”

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus tells the story of a persistent, stubborn widow who simply **never gives up**. I think, far too often, when interpreting this parable, an assumption is made that the unjust judge is God, and we are to relentlessly badger God with our prayers and requests as did this widow who was so persistent with the corrupt judge. When such an understanding is asserted, we get far too preoccupied with the unattractive comparison of God as an **unjust** judge and consequently we don't get into the **deeper** meaning of what Jesus is communicating. God is not like this corrupt judge, and he is NOT unjust! This story is a parable,

and remember, when we hear a parable, we can place ourselves in any one of the characters. Also, Jesus' parables are meant to be cognitive time bombs that shock us into new understandings as we think about them over time.

The scene of this parable unfolds in a place that is something like a hall of justice where a judge is seated on his judgement seat and throngs of petitioners are gathered about, some represented by lawyers while others are just shouting their requests from the crowd. And, this widow is in that crowd **every single day** when the court convenes. She wants vindication against an unnamed adversary. She wants **justice!** She relentlessly pleads for **justice!** Day after day after day, she is present shouting out for the justice she deserves. And, every single day the harsh, unsavory, immoral, corrupt judge, who "neither fears God nor respects people," ignores her. Yet, this poor, defenseless widow obstinately badgers the corrupt judge until he finally relents and renders a favorable judgment.

Now, we must remember the writer of Luke is communicating to a Greek audience, people who would picture a typical Roman judge. Judges in that culture had vast power within their jurisdiction. If they wanted to, they could decide cases based on personal whim alone and they frequently did just that. The judge in this story is such a judge, and he is depicted as

having **no** concern for justice. Jesus says the judge felt no “reverence” for people, but also **no** sense of “shame” in how he treated them. And, the contrast in the story is between this powerful magistrate who can do whatever he feels like doing and a poor widow who must simply take what she can get.

It is significant that Jesus portrays this woman as a widow. Widows, at that point in time, were powerless and the poorest of the poor. On the “power scale,” the judge is at one end and the widow at the other. Widows in the ancient world were incredibly vulnerable. And, threaded throughout Hebrew scriptures we find widows listed along with orphans and resident aliens (immigrants by the way) as those persons deserving **special protection**. The fact that this particular widow, unattended by any family, daily goes to beseech an unsavory judge who neither fears God nor respects people, highlights her **extreme** vulnerability. Her single-mindedness drives her to, on a daily basis, stubbornly persist in her pleas for **justice**. She keeps haranguing this judge, apparently making a public spectacle of herself...and him. She mercilessly bothers the judge. And, in fact, a more vivid and accurate translation of the judge's complaint when he says, “she keeps bothering me,” would be “she is giving me a black eye.” She's embarrassing him and calling into question his reputation by

persisting with her case. She is **speaking truth to power**. When discussing this brave widow's actions, one theologian suggests:

Like all black eyes, the one the widow's complaints threaten to inflict have a double effect, representing both physical **and** social distress. That is, the judge complains that the widow's relentless badgering not only causes him physical harm but also risks publicly embarrassing him. For this reason, he says -- perhaps justifying his actions to his wounded sense of self? -- that he relents not because he has changed his mind but simply to shut up this dangerous widow.

This judge finally decides that if he doesn't grant the widow's petition, she will wear him out - either figuratively or literally. So, eventually, despite his callousness and his lack of integrity, he gives the woman what she wants.

In our own time and in our own culture, we have been experiencing a steady drumbeat of news, giving us reports of injustice after injustice. And what has been done? The fact of the matter is that what we do as we work for justice is a form of prayer. Many of us **do** work for justice in a variety of ways and, when that longing for justice burns in your bones as it does in mine, seeking justice becomes part of the fabric of your life. In this country, over time, civil rights laws were established; and they have brought **some** progress, though such progress often comes quite slowly, and now it alarmingly seems to be regressing. Many organizations like ELCA AMMPARO, the ONE Campaign, Bread for the World, and ELCA Advocacy

have been working to raise awareness regarding human rights, equality, and poverty. And these organizations have been working hard to encourage lawmakers to enact policies that will help the poor, feed the hungry, and treat immigrants in humane and compassionate ways. But, quite frankly, there are too many who, seeing such things, speak words of lament but then go right back to doing whatever else it was they had been doing. They then become complicit in the outcome. So, I wonder and I ask: what does this parable mean for us today?

If this parable offers a mirror for **our** lives, then maybe the face many of us will see when we peer into that mirror is the face of the unjust judge who daily hears the cries of the poor and vulnerable and does **not respond**. Or, are we like that vulnerable woman, tirelessly petitioning the judge for justice? For me, I must say that the desire for justice calls me to never give up naming the injustice, denouncing the injustice, and working and calling for change in our culture, our country, and our world. You see, part of our baptismal calling is all about working **for** justice. It is also an active form of prayer.

When Jesus told a parable, quite often the deepest meaning in the story is the message of what **God** is like, what **God** is about, and what **God** is doing in this broken world. So, as we hear the **gospel** in this parable,

just maybe the **really good news** for all of us is that **God** is the one who is like that widow – unrelenting, persistent, assertive, and tenacious. God is the one who **does not** and will **never** give up. God **has** not, **does** not, and **will** not **ever** give up on **us**, even when we have acted as though we "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Just maybe, the real message in this short little story is that, because of God's great love for us, God became vulnerable like that poor widow, even to the point of being nailed to the cross like a common criminal. And, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's reign has broken into this world and **continues** to break into our world, bringing forth **justice** for **all** people. Now **that** is the kind of **good news** worth sharing. **That** is the kind of message **each** one of us can daily live as **we** relentlessly work for justice while proclaiming this very good news!