

Sermon Luke 18:1-8

From our heads to our hearts – a call to prayer in action.

Rev. Sharon Smith

Introduction:

In North Vancouver, there was a city counsellor who had no sense of the Divine and no heart for those less fortunate than herself. She had risen into office mostly because of her family connections, her wealth and education. You see her grandfather had owned most of the British Properties and was a respected and somewhat feared business person. Life had opened up for her without much effort.

Now in North Vancouver there was also:

- an immigrant woman from the Philippines who could not find work even though she tirelessly called and sent out resumes,
- There was a transgendered person without a community to share life,
- There was a man who had lived with schizophrenia since he was 16 and no longer had family, and
- There was a woman beginning a journey with dementia who had never partnered and was alone in her confusion in an apartment building in lower Lonsdale.

Jesus tells a parable that sets up extremes of social power and privilege on the one hand AND voicelessness and disadvantage on the other.

Jesus' parables are not meant to make his hearers feel comfortable.

Jesus' parable format is consistent with folklore storytelling customs of first century Palestine in their form and context – so they will often highlight familiar characters or scenes.

Where it differs is that where where folklore served to sanction the established beliefs, attitudes and institutions, Jesus parables seduced his audience by the expectedness of their format but they subverted them with the unexpectedness of the content.

Parables are intended to make us probe and question, ponder and wonder, discuss and debate about the absolutes of our religious faith, the certainties of our theological vision, the presuppositions, presumptions, and prejudices of our social, political and economic traditions. Parables are meant to foster permanent questioning.

John Dominic Crossan – The Power of Parable

These stories are meant to move a law or an ethical statement from our heads to our hearts.

Let's take a closer look at the core story before us:

We have a judge described as one who was of a wicked nature - neither reverent toward God nor kind to man.

Now to first century ears is this judge meant to represent an exception or a the norm?

It seems that the Roman court system was a closed circle of ambitious elites whose attentions were trained on amassing greater wealth and increasing personal prestige.

When Constantine was Emperor (331 AD) he corrected some of the corruption in an edict that read:

The judge's curtain shall not be up for sale; entrance (to his hearing) shall not be gained by purchase, the private council chamber shall not be made notorious by auction. The governor shall not make his appearance only because it is bought; the ears of the judge shall be open to the poorest on equal terms with the rich.

So, the judge described in the parable represents the norm rather than an exception.

We are supposed to recognise a system that is unjust. And it certainly isn't difficult to think of the many ways our system is set up to serve some and neglect others.

What corruption in our system have you noticed?

And we have a widow:

Disenfranchised because of her marital and economic status,

AND her gender would have prevented her from having a public voice to defend herself.

In the Mediterranean world a modest woman did not visit the public offices of the court. Such legal visits were performed by lawyers or some male relative of the woman. And yet this woman had no man to do this for her.

Can you imagine what it must have been like?

Standing before the unjust judge life seems big, powerful, and overwhelming. You feel small, powerless, and alone. There is no one to defend or represent you. You stand by yourself unsure what to believe about life or yourself. No matter what you do or say nothing changes, nothing works.

And yet this is not some meek woman who sits back to let things happen – No my friends, the surprise of this parable is that this is one feisty woman.

Day after day she speaks of the injustice done to her. Day after day she holds her story out before the judge, the world, and God.

With a brief command, she does not even use a customary title for the judge, the image of her is tough and unwilling to accept the judge's refusal. Even with a social power differential this judge has met his match.

So the situation is probably a court proceeding.

It is one that would have been known very well to the audience: this widow has prepared a petition for an offending person to be prosecuted in the court, but the judge denies that she has sufficient grounds and refuses to proceed.

Her case has been dismissed out of court.

And yet she keeps going back.

And because of the corruption of the court it was the place of last resort to seek justice. Most people would have tried to resolve disputes on their own by meetings between the parties, or by mediation or arbitration. But if none of these brought results, the courts were the last stage.

This was her last resort.

And she persists with personal visits to the judge (probably interrupting his busy schedule, intruding when he was busy with other cases, seen as rude, defiant, or even bossy).

Her actions are to be seen outrageous and quite a surprise to the listener, to say the least. She has no regard at all for the social rules that would keep her invisible and silent.

And she wears the judge out. The Greek uses an image that literally means she gives the judge a black eye. This socially conforming judge fears a woman who is prepared to shake up the social order, for she has nothing to lose.

An unconventional woman humiliates a judge. And the judge makes a decision for justice not for her sake but rather to protect himself from any kind of embarrassment.

The Parable of the Feisty Widow and the Threatened Judge (Luke 18.1–8)

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And isn't that the way of God.

Where weakness is strength.

Where vulnerable voices shake up the powerful.

Where the gentleness of the Spirit is disruptive.

And this parable in Luke's writing is embedded in an invitation to prayer and an invitation to be faithful through all of life with persistent action towards justice.

Where a prayer filled life is a life, not of quiet contemplation or following norms, but of unconventional action.

Eugene Peterson writes that in a sense this wisdom teaching of Jesus is saying:
If you claim to be a follower of Christ, praying is what you do as you are following, as you are preparing, as you are walking everyday situations out. You don't stop off to pray, you pray your way through life.

And all prayer is embedded in person and place and time.

Eugene Peterson – Tell it slant

To pray always means that we offer our cry to God and then we do whatever we can to bring about the change we seek trusting that God also is already doing what God needs to do.

Maybe that means we seek counseling or a support group. We feed the hungry. We offer compassion to the grieving. We speak and teach against hatred and prejudice, respecting the dignity of every human being. We strive for justice and peace. We make our case not just before God but with God. We join God in answering prayer.

Joining God on the side of the oppressed, standing with...

- an immigrant woman from the Philippines who cannot find work
- or a transgendered person without a community to share life,
- or a man who lives with schizophrenia and no longer had family, or
- a woman beginning a journey with dementia who is alone

Defying convention.

I learnt a phrase from a Priest Father Greg Boyle who works with the gang members in Los Angeles: Here, Now, This.

- What do we see here, in our context?
- What is happening now that needs our attention?
- Who is right before our eyes?

What is the Spirit bringing to our attention? Moving from our head to our heart... Calling us into prayerful action.