

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 18:1-8

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The parable of the mouthy widow and the recalcitrant judge is a great story that embodies many of the characteristics of Jesus' parables. It is truly provocative and funny. It invites those who hear it to think about the kingdom of God and about prayer.

The story is introduced by Luke as a parable that Jesus told to people about their need to always pray and not to lose heart. The protagonist is a judge who neither feared God nor had any respect for people. He was utterly cynical. He was a typical first century judge simply doing his job in order to make money. It was often the case that judges in the ancient world were corrupt as is also true in the modern world.

The other character in the story is a mouthy widow. She was neither passive nor whining. She was demanding. The way in which her words are to be told is with a firm, forceful tone. The clear storyline is that she was constantly approaching the judge over and over again and bugging him.

The first episode, then, introduces the characters and establishes the context: a recalcitrant judge, a demanding and mouthy widow. The next episode is about the judge and his decision. "For a while he refused." This is an opportunity to portray the judge in his cynicism, his gruffness, his hostility, and his determination to do nothing. While telling, you might cross your arms over your chest in a gesture of stubborn defiance. It is an opportunity to act and sound like a mule that is simply refusing to move.

The second part of the episode describes the internal dialogue of this cynical judge: "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she won't wear me out by her continual coming." This needs to be told as a cynical, gruff, hostile judge who is deciding to give the widow her due because she keeps bothering him.

The probable issue that the listeners would have assumed is that she was not getting her rightful share of the inheritance of her deceased husband. The inheritance laws of the ancient world often created problems for women. Other male relatives, even sons, would frequently intervene. They had more connections and would end up getting the inheritance and leaving the widow helpless and destitute. Jesus' listeners would have been familiar with these cases. Widows were the poorest people in Jesus' society and it was often because they were denied their just right to the inheritance of their dead husbands. However, in most instances the widows would simply passively accept their loss and wouldn't do anything. They wouldn't complain or demand justice. This widow does.

This parable is a comparison between the judge and God. The word that Jesus uses to describe the judge, usually translated "unjust," is the Greek word *adikias*. This word

means wicked, unrighteous or unjust. It is the same Greek word used in the commentary that immediately follows the parable of the shrewd steward (Luke 16:1-8), which is often called the parable of the crooked or dishonest steward. In this instance, Jesus laughingly praises the unjust judge and compares God with him. "Will not God much more rapidly listen and grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him, day and night? Will he wait in helping them? No, he will grant them justice, quickly."

The comparison to God is for the purpose of recommending a particular style of prayer. In this parable Jesus recommends that you pray like the widow. On the one hand, it is that she was persistent. She kept asking, demanding justice. But it is also the tone of her prayer that is recommended. She demands that the judge give her justice.

It is the same tone as the Lord's prayer, which Jesus teaches his followers to pray. Jesus' prayer is a series of imperatives: "Hallow your name. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us and do not lead us into evil." Jesus' recommendation of a style of prayer is to be mouthy like this widow and to state what you want in short sentences, not going on and on and on "like the Gentiles."

Luke's version of the Lord's prayer is probably more original than Matthew's. If you compare the two, Luke's is shorter. It is a series of imperatives that make a series of demands of God. It is in effect a series of commands to God about what God is to do, as is the case with this widow: "Grant me justice."

This parable also corresponds to the human experience of God and the quest for justice. Justice is often delayed and it appears that God is not listening. So Jesus' recommendation is to pay attention to the character of God. God is always listening night and day. Pray and God will respond.

Jesus' last question, with which the parable ends, is skeptical: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" The implied answer is no, he won't. Why? Because people don't believe. So the end of the parable is an injunction to the listeners to pay attention to their own faith and to be an exception to what Jesus clearly expects, that when the Son of Man (that is, he) returns, he will not find faith on the earth.

I recommend that you tell this parable as a parable of confrontation, of not being passive but of being insistent and demanding in relation to God as this widow was not passive, not whining, but demanding in relation to the corrupt judge. This is a really fun story to tell and I encourage you to tell it with gusto and to make it as delightful and provocative as Jesus' parable was when he first told it. This parable is an experience of the character of the historical Jesus.