



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
20 October 2019
Sermon: "Justice for All"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Psalm 119:97-104
Luke 18:1-8

Psalm 119:97-104

- ⁹⁷*Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.*
- ⁹⁸*Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.*
- ⁹⁹*I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.*
- ¹⁰⁰*I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.*
- ¹⁰¹*I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.*
- ¹⁰²*I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.*
- ¹⁰³*How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!*
- ¹⁰⁴*Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.*

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry to God day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

~

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said: “The arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

For the past three weeks in Sunday School, our GCPC youth have been discussing issues of justice while diving into this parable together. We have asked numerous questions about this judge and this widow:

What were their names and backgrounds?

What were they feeling in the midst of this courtroom drama?

What kept the widow coming back again and again?

What was it exactly that caused the judge to do as she asked?

And finally was justice really served?

We did an exercise in our Sunday School class that I want to invite us all to do together now.

I want you to find a partner. This could be the person sitting next to you, or in front of you, or behind you. You might know this person or you might be meeting them for the first time.

If you don't have a partner, I want you to go ahead and join a duo, and for this exercise, you are going to be “the observer.”

With your partner, I want you to choose who will be “Person A” and who will be “Person B.”

In just a moment, I want you to engage in a conversation with your partner, but am going to set some simple parameters:

Person A, the only word you can say in this conversation is “Please.”

Person B, the only word you can say is “No.”

Now, you can say your word as many times as you like, in as many ways you like, going back and forth, but you can only say your word – nothing else. Please begin your conversations now.

(After conversations) If you are Person A, in a word or phrase tell me: what was your experience like? How did it feel to only say the word, “Please?”

Person Bs, in a word or phrase what was your experience like? How did it feel to only say the word, “No?”

And for any observers out there: what was it like to watch these conversations unfold?

This exercise is one that illuminates some hard truths about life: the world we live in can feel unjust, frustrating, and more.

There are always imbalances of power: Person As and Person Bs; Widows and Judges; those who seek justice again and again, and those who can grant it or refuse it.

On a grand scale, we know that the families we were born into, our nationalities, complexions, identities and connections can all contribute to our ability to live lives where we are left saying “please” over and over, or where we have the privilege to say “no” and turn a blind eye as often as we'd like.

We know that there are certainly situations, where some of us hold power over others: times when our decisions carry more weight, where the ball is in our court, where we determine if justice is deserved.

And then there are times when the tables are turned: where we are the vulnerable ones, unable to control a certain outcome, asking for mercy or understanding, shouting out for justice ‘till our throats are sore.

In today’s text, we meet a widow and an unjust judge: the powerless and the powerful. We don’t know much about their backgrounds or how exactly their conversation unfolded. All that we know is that Jesus says this story teaches us much about our need to never lose hope and about the nature of God. Knowing this, we come close to the table again this week with a fresh question on our hearts: What does God’s justice look like?

In a world where there is such an imbalance of power, where life is not fair and prayers do not always feel answered, how can we as Christ’s disciples *really* trust in a God who promises to grant swift justice to those who cry out? Is there *really* enough compassion and mercy to go around? Can we have faith in a just God?

~

I wonder what sort of justice the widow came seeking that day.

Our Gospel writer does not tell us much about her, although we can of course make some assumptions. After all, she was a widow living in ancient Israel (a time when power was certainly unbalanced) and widows were among the most vulnerable.

They were unable to own property, or apply for a 9 to 5 job. Instead, they relied on the kindness and pity of strangers and relatives to survive. Although Jewish law spoke about caring for the widows in society, as justice would have it, many were left to beg on the streets, or exploit their bodies, or do whatever they could to make it to tomorrow.

What is fascinating about our widow is although she is powerless in society and in a court of law, she does not carry herself that way. She is surprising resilient and shrewd beyond measure – somehow gaining access to a judge day after day and then fearlessly speaking her mind until she changes his.

The text does not tell us about the sort of justice she seeks, but our GCPC Youth have had plenty of intriguing predictions:

Some of our youth imagine that she came seeking justice against her opponent who was ready to evict her from home. Her husband had just died after a long battle with cancer. All of their money had gone to his treatments, which ultimately could not save him. Now she was about to lose everything.

Others say her opponent was a sibling, who had stolen money from her and had refused to return it – even after she begged and pleaded.

And others still, say she came hungry for justice for her dog, Patsy who was tragically run over by an ox cart.

Funny, that Luke doesn't tell us what brought the widow to the judge's feet day after day...but maybe that's the point. Perhaps her reason for being there should make no difference to Jesus or to us. It is not *what* she is asking for that matters, but rather that she *never gives up* asking.

It must have been a treacherous road.

We don't know how many times she stood before that judge: was it 5 or 50 or 500?

Did she wait long hours before she could see or did she have to push or bribe her way through?

We don't know many times she heard the word "no:" was it said through a snicker, or in anger, or with a back turned?

Was she walked out or thrown out each time to see him; was she spit on, or cursed at, or worse?

How many of us would have given up, lost faith, turned to despair?

But this widow - even in her hopeless state, keeps fighting. Each morning she musters up the courage to cry out for justice once more. Like a prayer repeated again and again, "*Come, Lord Jesus,*" this widow embodies the sort of faith that disrupts everything logical: deep in her weary bones, she still believes that somehow, someday, her voice will be heard, justice will be granted.

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I wonder.... what was it that finally convinced the judge to bend towards justice?

Now we know that to be a judge in ancient times meant that you had a slew of connections with those at the very top. Judges were appointed by the powerful and were expected to see to it that the elite maintained or *increased* their wealth and influence.

For these judges, human greed and ego often trumped fairness and compassion for the oppressed. And the widow's judge was not afraid to name this broken system proudly:

"I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone," he proclaimed!

Scripture teaches us that "to fear God" is the beginning of wisdom, so this judge is not only unjust – he is also unwise. He lacks a moral compass, or any sense of the divine. He is unable to see a world beyond himself. He is consumed with his own power and control and the widow's hunger for justice does not affect his own status or safety. So, he blocks her out, brushes her aside, answers "no" to every "please."

But then something changes – something shifts. Somehow, someday, the widow gets under his skin. *Does she finally get him to look into her eyes? Does she name the loneliness he masks so well? Does she declare that she will come back for the rest of her life until he listens?*

We don't know, but something about her refusal to 'give up' causes him to act justly.

The judge says that the widow is “*bothering him*,” but this Greek word “to bother” can also mean “*to cause me labor*” or “*to give me work*.”

The widow is literally putting him to work. She is more than a belting voice in a courtroom, she is now an unlikely teacher and preacher. Her persistence is more powerful than her status. The judge is able to look up and see her and be changed.

Finally comes the day, when she is able to push this prominent and established figure towards hard, soul-searching work that ultimately expands his vision, opens wide his heart, and paves the way for holy justice.

And so too it is for us. Like the judge who could not see beyond his own self-interest, the widow humbles us to self-reflection.

Like the judge who sat high in comfort, the widow invites us to experience discomfort and let the oppressed lead the way.

Like the judge who had no fear of God, the widow shows us how to wise up – and like the judge, catch a glimpse of a Creator whose justice and compassion *is* abundant and always possible.

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Fourteen years ago, Alex McNeil, a transgender man and Asheville native felt a strong call to the ministry and began the process of ordination in our Presbytery of Western North Carolina.

During this period, our denomination still did not permit LGBTQIA+ persons to be ordained; so Alex was unsure if he would ever be permitted to become a minister. One of his mentors told him: “I hope the rules for ordination change in your lifetime, but to honest I’m not sure when.” Fourteen years is a long time to be on a journey - especially when your identity (who you are) is one of the things preventing you from crossing the finish line.

Alex reminded me that there were plenty of roadblocks and boulders along the way: hard questions, shattering disappointments, moments of doubt, and anger, and even hopelessness.

But Alex stayed the course and our presbytery continued on the journey with him. He kept pushing, and praying, and working, and speaking out. He said that his greatest hope and strength came from his advocacy work as the Executive Director of More Light Presbyterian, working tirelessly for the inclusion of all God’s children in churches – no matter their gender or sexual identity.

And then one day our denomination – both miraculously and thanks to years of hard work – finally reformed, clearing the path to ordination for all God’s people.

A week ago, I had the privilege of participating in Alex’s ordination service at First Presbyterian Church downtown. I know many of us were there or watching online. It was a historic day, particularly for the Church Universal: Alex is the first openly transgender man to go through the

process of ordination in the Presbyterian Church USA, but he prays he will not be the last (and that future folks will have a shorter road to travel).

During the service, Rev. Pete Peery reminded all of us that our vision of the church was so much smaller than it is today – in part thanks to Alex.

And this year, our own church, GCPC finally became a More Light Congregation – further staking our claim in this expanded vision of God’s abundant love and justice for all.

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Friends, we live in a world of stark power imbalances, where justice is so often distorted, where the powerful can dismiss this table, and the powerless can feel far from it.

But Christ has always been ready to meet us here –
to listen to our stories and struggles, to expand our vision,
to respond with an abundance of justice, swift healing, and new life.

Each of us has had our own journey to this table.
At times, we have come as the widow.
At times we have come as the judge.
But God has always extended the invitation to be seated.

Here at this table, we meet a Savior who hears our cries today and promises to never let us go.
Here, we can trust that Christ’s love is so exquisite and persistent, that it can enter the heart of an unjust judge, and transform it for God’s purpose.

Here we meet a Savior, who is on the side of the vulnerable – no matter what. And like the widow, we can trust that Christ will never stop shouting out our names until we awaken to our shared calling to be builders of God’s kingdom here and now.

Friends, our God is a God of abundant justice,
and at this table there is more than enough to go around.

So come, pull up a chair, day after day, week after week
and let Jesus heal us and ready us for the hard work ahead.

“The arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”
Christ will see to it. And so must we.