

Messiah Moravian Church
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Luke 18:1-8

A Shameless God

Today we continue Luke's parade of parables with one that features two fairly unattractive characters. Like Jacob's struggles with the angel, we will need wrestle with this story for its blessing.

Some years ago, notable experts in the field of Biblical Studies created the Jesus Seminar to determine the historicity of the New Testament. When it comes to this particular parable the Jesus Seminar suggests that it is most likely a parable that Jesus actually told. However, they believe that the writer of Luke is responsible for the interpretation of the parable that serves as an editorial designed for the specific needs of his community.

Luke was writing at the end of the first century some 60 to 80 years after the life of Jesus. During this time, the Romans were persecuting both Jewish and Christian communities. Maintaining faith and hope in the face of such persecution would have been difficult for his audience. Most likely, Luke inserted his own interpretation when he has Jesus proclaim, "Won't God then do justice to the chosen who call out day and night? Will God delay long over them? I tell you, God will give them swift justice. But when the Promised One comes will faith be found anywhere on earth?"

I wonder if the usual explanation of this parable disturbs you as it does me. The general interpretation says that just as the unjust judge heard the widow because of her persistence, so too God will hear us if we persist in our prayer requests. If we persist, God will give in like the unjust judge who gave into the widow's requests just because the widow ceaselessly bothered him. But to tell the truth, in my experience persistence doesn't always get us what we want. But according to this parable we ought to be able to wear God down if we just keep asking, like a three-year-old in Wal-Mart begging her parents for a special toy.

If we accept such a reading of the parable, we embrace a most troubling portrayal of God. Do we really see God as unjust, oblivious to the cries of those in need around him, asleep as the world's woes grow larger and more pressing? I do not believe it is how people of faith really conceive of God.

If the text is about prayer, then it is about the two-way interaction that happens when we pray. Prayer is as much about what we say to God as it is about what God says to us and what we hear when we pray and listen.

What if we turn this interpretation on its head? What if we see the judge as emblematic of systems in our human society? Like our systems often become, the judge was inflexible, aloof, resistant to interference, opposed to alteration. So often we are complicit in supporting these unjust institutional systems. What if we see the widow as a picture of God-persistent, incessant, calling out societal injustices, raising a ruckus when things are unfair or inequitable. Now the parable becomes a message about the way God continues to press us, challenge us, confront us, push us to grow in our discipleship and urge us to deepen in our faith through service to our brothers and sisters.

If we explore the word used to describe the widow in the original Greek of this Gospel, the word that is usually translated as “persistent”, we will find that the word is more accurately rendered as “shameless”. Can we accept that image of God, insistently, shamelessly demanding justice of us?

With such a shift of interpretation, the widow acts precisely the way that Lady Wisdom is portrayed in the eighth chapter of Proverbs. She stands boldly in the public arena of ancient Israel: “On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out”. These locations were where men were expected to be active. The gates to the town were the places where men gathered to discuss Torah and determine cases brought to them as judges.

A woman standing there vocally active in such a public way was a breach of the honor-shame code. Women speaking out in public were acting in a way that challenged the honor of men who alone “rightly” belonged there. Lady Wisdom did not adhere to the posture and action of shame that she was required to demonstrate, as the flip side of honor. She acted shamelessly in the male-dominated culture of ancient Israel.

The widow, pressing the point with the judge, is not only persistent, but— like Lady Wisdom and like God—utterly shameless in her determination. Like the pleading widow, God pursues us and persistently cries out for justice, trusting that eventually we will hear those pleas and respond in word and deed.

In Christ, God chooses to give up power, authority and might to side with the lowly. God meets the systems and structures of human power with weakness and gives those powers a black eye with persistent demands for justice.

God unexpectedly surprises us in the Christ-like shameless widow, turning the world upside down, turning injustice to justice, brokenness into healing and death into life.

As the people of God, we are called to march, sometimes, like Jacob, to struggle, towards the light that is not overcome by the darkness, towards the kingdom already among us.