

## The Trouble Making Widow

The conversations I enjoy with other pastors on Wednesday mornings are usually interesting for several reasons, not the least of which is the common thread which the conversation often yields that this reading of the text will lead to a different word being lifted that which was discerned in their last encounter...This is the third time I have been through year C of the lectionary and it is the second time that the passage from Luke 18 is the one which spoke to me as bearing a message which I needed to hear and which I had somehow missed before. When I spoke about this passage to you before, it seems what predominated came from the subtitle found in your Pew Bible which reads "The Parable of the Persistent Widow." In fact, I titled the sermon "Squeaky Wheels" because of the saying often heard in my youth about the squeaky wheel getting the grease. That saying is based on a truism about human nature. And indeed, the introduction which Luke gives seems to indicate that might be the purpose of the parable; yet when reading it again, it seemed to me, there might be more to the parable than a general encouragement to pray and not to lose heart; to be a squeaky wheel. But really, do we believe that God needs us to be squeaky wheels for God to hear us? The passage begins simply enough: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." But the situation given in the parable is not a general situation about daily life, but one that is very specific. The situation Jesus describes is about injustice; injustice not being remedied by the system set up to see that justice is done. This injustice has occurred in a situation known to be of particular concern to God because of the many Laws given concerning the welfare of widows and orphans which are found in the Torah. "He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.'" In the Greek, what the widow is asking for is vindication, which is also asking for justice. We are not given what injustice has been done in this situation, but the widow has gone seeking justice, vindication for her case. In Israel, the position of the judge was to be God's representative, to be the administer of the Laws of Moses. So the description of the judge tells us that he is poorly qualified, totally unfit for his position. The expected outcome is injustice because the reputation of the judge. His reputation is such that he is known not to fear God, which would make the judgment weigh on the side of justice for the widow; not does he have "respect for people", that is, he doesn't care what people may think about his decisions. So the outcome seems to be predictable: She loses her case. But she refuses accept this; she refuses to be dismissed. She keeps coming to him, saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' Then something odd happens, and in most of our translations, it seems that her persistence wins the day. "For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and not respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" Somehow, this time I got to wondering about this "bothering of the judge". What was she doing that was so bothersome? In the Greek, this bothering was actually a word much more dramatic; it literally is a term used in boxing---to strike beneath the eye. The Young's Literal translation of this is that the widow keeps coming and giving him trouble...pestering...so while not literally giving him a black eye...she is definitely being a real pain to him more than the use of "bothering" seems to indicate. The second part of the conclusion, so that she may not "wear me out" by continually

coming...actually seems to indicate some anxiety about a possible attack...He literally is concerned she might eventually come and strike him in the face according to the Greek words used. Perhaps the image presented is one of a judge not wanting to be embarrassed by an enraged widow giving him a black eye more than actual fear. Whatever, the reason, the widow gets her vindication...her justice. After the parable tells us that the widow is vindicated, we are told: "And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says." What exactly did the unjust judge say as he decided to give the widow her vindication, her justice? It seems that despite declaring he did not fear God nor did he care respect people, because the widow kept "causing him trouble" he did indeed begin to feel some uneasiness. The parable about a widow facing injustice begins with the information that there is a need to pray always and not to lose heart. Perhaps that is not a co-incidence but a connection. Widows had no protection within society aside from those established by Mosaic Law and Jewish traditional values related to it, so where did this widow get the strength to keep "bothering the judge" so such an extent that he began to pay attention to her? Why did she not lose heart? Could it be that her strength and courage came from her constant prayers? That her prayers gave her strength to act in the face of injustice? What is the message being given to those Jesus is telling this parable to at the conclusion. When verse 7-9 declares "and will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" We are not actually told that the widow in the parable cried to God. In the parable she went to the system which was supposed to administer justice, but was not. In doing so, she achieved justice for herself. The conclusion of the parable seems to then urge constant appeal to God for vindication and justice which God will quickly grant. Yet, in this broken world we live in, that rarely seems to be effective. What if we are missing a link here? What if we are to indeed be in constant prayer for strength to keep from losing heart so that we can keep working for justice in this broken world which has so many unjust judges who do not fear God and have no respect for people? What if that is the message for us? And that final question, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" is that directed at us who seem to have abdicated the constant seeking of justice for the vulnerable in our broken world. Perhaps our prayers are to include not only pleas to the Lord for his actions, but for guidance and strengthen for our faith for the actions which we are to be about in order to bring God's reign closer? What are the prayers that we should be offering? I found this suggested prayer for justice which I think is appropriate. It gives a list of things for which to pray. While praying for these things, we might add a petition for how we might act in these situations to aid the cause of justice. The suggestions are: Pray for those who are hungry. Pray harder for those who will not feed them. Pray for those who struggle each week to pay their bills. Pray harder for the wealthy who do not care. Pray for those who are homeless. Pray harder for those who deny them shelter. Pray for the sick and lonely. Pray harder for those who will not give them comfort. Pray for those who cry out for dignity. Pray harder for those who will not listen. Pray for those oppressed by unjust wages. Pray harder for those who exploit them. Pray for those who bear the yoke of prejudice. Pray harder for those who discriminate against them. Pray for those whose basic needs are denied. Pray harder for public officials who cater to the greedy and ignore those bound unjustly. I think perhaps this world needs more widows and others willing to make trouble for unjust judges. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

