

ðNag, nag, nagö
 Luke 18:1-8
 Farmville Baptist Church
 August 22, 2021
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This morning we continue our sermon series on the parables, and this one is a ðdoozie.ö This story is introduced as a parable about prayer and not losing heart, then moves into a story about justice, and ends with a question about faith and the end times ó all in eight short verses. So what do we make of this odd story and what might it have to teach us this morning?

The story opens with an introduction by Luke, ðThen Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.ö It's easy for us to lose heart these days, isn't it? If you read or watch the news, Afghanistan has fallen back into the hands of the Taliban, Haiti has been rocked by the assassination of their president, a major earthquake and a tropical storm; wildfires are racing across the northwestern United States and through parts of Europe while other areas, here and abroad, are experiencing flooding. COVID cases are rising again, putting stress on overburdened hospitals and medical staff, and creating havoc for students, teachers and administrators who are trying to get and keep our schools reopened. As we heard just a few moments ago, our own prayer list is long. This morning, we need to hear a story about remaining faithful in prayer and not losing heart.

Luke's early readers needed to hear this reminder too. In the chapter just before this one, Luke recounts teaching about the end times that is attributed to Jesus, and friends the passage is not for the faint of heart. The passage talks about the suffering of the Son of Man, and the difficulty of the last days. Remember, the early believers were expecting Jesus to return quickly ó within their lifetimes surely, but here they are, some fifty years later ó still waiting. Not only are they still waiting ó uncertain and confused, the Temple has been destroyed and the early

church is suffering significant persecution. It is in the midst of this uncertainty over Jesus' return and their own suffering that Luke places this parable about persistence, prayer and justice.

Following Luke's brief introduction, we have the story proper which is only 4 verses long (verses 2-5 (verses 6-8 are additional commentary on this original story.) The first character we meet is a judge in a certain city. What do you think of when you hear the word judge? Ideally, we think of people who are fair and impartial in ruling on the cases brought before them. This is consistent with the description of judges found in Deuteronomy where Moses charges them with the following instructions, "Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging, hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's." According to this passage, the judge in today's story fails miserably. Twice the story tells us that he does not fear God nor does he respect people. He refuses to hear the widow's case.

The second character to arrive in our story is the widow herself. The laws of the day were designed to help protect widows, orphans, and resident aliens – usually society's most vulnerable members. Exodus 22:22-23 gives the Israelites a strong warning about this: You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and **your** wives shall become widows and **your** children orphans."

But let's be careful not to assume that just because widows were vulnerable that they were all destitute and helpless – far from it. We find a number of widows in Scripture who were strong and clever women. There was the Moabite Ruth who left her own family and home to travel back to Israel with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. There she secures their future and

becomes an ancestress of Jesus. In the gospels, the widow who gives her last coins to the temple treasury is a model of faithful generosity. The first widow in the Gospel of Luke is Anna, a prophet, who spreads the good news of Jesus' birth. Jesus in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth mentions the widow of Zarephath, who feeds Elijah from her meager supplies in a famine and whose son is returned to life by the prophet. Jesus replays this miracle in the raising of the only son of the widow of Nain.ⁱ These women were persistent and assertive, just like the widows in our own congregation.

So it is with the widow in today's story. We don't know her name, we don't know if she is rich or poor, but we do know that she has the time to repeatedly appear before the judge, pleading her case. "Give me justice against my opponent," she asks over and over again. We have no idea who the woman's opponent is or what he/she may have done to her. But whatever it is, she isn't willing to let it go. She keeps after the judge, "Nag, Nag, Nag."

We also have no idea why the judge is so unwilling to hear her case. Some scholars wonder if since he did not fear God or respect others, if he was waiting for a bribe from her, or perhaps one from her opponent. Others wonder if her case wasn't that strong to start with. We just don't know. Whatever the case, the judge finally relents, not because he cares about her or her issues, but so she will stop bothering him. His words in verse 5 are, "I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out." Our English translations don't do this phrase justice. "Wear me out," is actually a boxing term, it literally means he worries that she will give him a black eye. When you were kids, how many of you associated the term, "wear him out," with a solid spanking or a fight? We don't know if the judge thought that the widow would literally attack him, or if she would tarnish his reputation, but either way he gives her what she wants so that she will leave him alone. Period, the end. This concludes the original story.

But what does it mean? Luke follows this story with commentary by Jesus. “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he not delay in helping them?”

It sounds like Jesus is comparing God to the unjust judge here, doesn't it? But could that possibly be? Besides, David Butterick notes, “The notion that, repeatedly, we must bang on the door of heaven if we are to catch God's attention is hardly an appropriate theology of prayer.”ⁱⁱ As Christians we claim the promises that God is full of grace and loving kindness, that God is just and fair, that God knows our needs before we even ask, that God hears us when we pray, and that God walks with us through every situation. Most scholars believe that the unjust judge can only be seen as a negative example, if an unjust man can do this, how much more will a loving God do for us? Interpreted this way, this passage is similar to the one in Luke 11 where Jesus says,

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for^a a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

This is a well respected interpretation of this parable, and there is much truth in it. But my ministry colleague Rev. Dr. Julie Perry looks at two radical twists in this story. First, she wonders, what if God **is** an unjust judge?ⁱⁱⁱ After all, she writes, God doesn't give us what we deserve. The word that the widow uses for justice can also mean retribution or vengeance ó that could be what she asking the judge for ó and he gives it to her. But God isn't unjust in that way. Instead of giving us what we deserve, or what others might ask God to do to us, God offers us

forgiveness and grace out of love. Like the shepherd and the woman in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, God takes the initiative to seek us out and find us ó often before we even realize we are lost.

If this weren't intriguing enough, Julie asks us to consider another, even more radical possibility. What if, she asks, God represents the widow in this story? What if God is the one persistently seeking justice, beating on the doors of the world, working to break down all of our unjust systems? (PAUSE)

On Mother's Day we talked about female images of God, and this might just be one. Is this widow like Sophia ó Wisdom ó that we hear in about in Proverbs? Chapter 8 tells us, "Does not wisdom call; and does not understanding raise her voice? 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, "I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice."

Friends, can we ó will we- join our hands with God's hammering on the doors of the world for justice? (PAUSE) As much as we all need to do this, I want to acknowledge how very hard it is, how very tired we all are, how bruised and battered our hands and our hearts are these days. Some of you may be familiar with Nadia Bolz-Weber ó she's an edgy, yet prophetic voice these days. This week she wrote a blog where she dealt with her own compassion fatigue. She said, "I just do not think our psyches were developed to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at us right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day. The human heart and spirit were developed to be able to hold, feel and respond to any tragedy, injustice, sorrow or natural disaster that was happening IN OUR VILLAGE. She goes on to say that our naturally limited capacity and the constant barrage of needs and injustices that

we are exposed to 24/7 leave us to wonder if we are doing enough, sacrificing enough, giving enough and saying enough. The answer we most often tell ourselves is no, with all the needs in the worlds it seems that even working together we can never do enough. But, she notes, doing nothing is not an option either. So what are we to do? Nadia finds help with discernment by asking herself, “What is mine to do and what is not mine to do? Every day she seeks to remind herself 1. We are still living through a global pandemic and that means the baseline of anxiety and grief is higher than ever and shared by everyone. 2. The world is on fire literally and metaphorically. and 3. I only have so much water in my bucket to help with the fires. The more exposure I have to the fires I have NO WATER to fight, she say, the more likely I am to get so burned, and inhale so much smoke that I cannot help anymore with the fires close enough to fight once my bucket is full again. So I try and tell myself that It’s ok to focus on one fire. To us she says, “It’s ok to do what is YOURS to do. Say what’s yours to say. Care about what’s yours to care about. That’s enough.” We cannot do everything, but we can all do something, so may we persist.

Gracious God,

We thank you that that you are a God of love and mercy ó not a God of vengeance. We thank you for a God who cares about the most vulnerable among us, and that you call us to do the same. We thank you that Jesus modeled for us what it looks like to speak truth to power, and that even now you stand alongside us, beating on the doors of the world, working for Your kingdom to come. God, we confess that we are tired, so please help us to persist in prayer and not lose heart. Show what is ours to do and give us the strength to do it. In Jesus strong name we pray, Amen.

ⁱ Meda Stamper, workingpreacher.org October 20, 2013

ⁱⁱ David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*, 186

ⁱⁱⁱ Julie Perry, “God as Unjust Judge?” *Review and Expositor*, 109, Spring 2012.