

Luke 18:1-8
10/16/16—Pentecost 22C

Psalm 119:97-105
II Timothy 3:14—4:5

Seeker of Justice

Early in the last century, my mother was born in China. She was the daughter of Methodist missionaries. When they returned to the United States, among the possessions my mother brought from China was a photograph of the woman who had been her beloved childhood *amah*—that is, the one to whom her care had been entrusted.

But before this woman became a part of my grandparents' household, she had been widowed. Her husband had died. And she was then turned out of his family's house. Turned out of the only home she had. This poignant black-and-white photo depicts a solitary figure walking down a dirt road, away from her village. Her back is to the camera. She has nothing except the clothes she's wearing. She has no one. She's an outcast. She's alone. Totally alone.

How does her plight compare with the circumstances of contemporary widows and widowers? With the circumstances of *any* aging person—single for whatever reason—who lives alone, with no family nearby? As America's population continues to age,

the care of older adults is becoming a major issue in our consciousness and in our country. The fixed income of many seniors places them at or near poverty level. Some are faced with the choice of buying food or buying essential medication that's no longer affordable. In many cultures, elders are honored and revered for their wisdom and their life experience. But is that the case in our own society? Do we assure seniors that they're still beloved members of our families, still able to offer valued contributions? How *just* are our twenty-first century communities?

And how just were communities in the days when Jesus walked the earth? In this Sunday's gospel reading, Jesus tells the story of a judge. And of a widow who comes to him pleading: *Give me justice in this case against my adversary.*

Now in biblical times, when a man dies, his property goes to his sons or to his brothers. A widow cannot inherit what had belonged to her husband. She has no income. No pension. No Social Security. No Medicare. A widow is completely dependent on the support of a male relative. Without one, she's destitute.

For this widow in Jesus's parable, there *is* no male relative. She's one of society's most vulnerable. Like the Chinese woman

of my mother's childhood, the widow in this gospel account is alone. No family accompanies her. No one advocates for her. She stands before the judge in a desperate situation. More than likely, someone owes her money. This judge represents her only hope of being repaid a sum that she almost certainly needs to live on. That she needs to *survive!* This widow has run out of options.

And her prospects of getting a favorable ruling from this judge don't look too promising, do they? According to Jesus, this judge *never [gives] God a thought and [cares] nothing for people*. In other words, he's an *unjust* judge. But he's the only game in town. She's got no choice but to persist in petitioning this unjust judge for justice. She's got no *choice* but to keep asking.

Now Luke, who's narrating this story, tells us that with her repeated requests, this widow models for you and me the need to pray always, without ceasing. Throughout his Gospel, Luke focuses on prayer as the very heart of the life of faith. Luke makes sure his readers see Jesus himself at prayer from the beginning until the end of his ministry.

During this Christian year, we've been journeying with Jesus through Luke's Gospel. We've heard more than a few of Jesus' best-known and best-loved parables. We have been learning from

the Master. We have also learned that there's more than just one way to look at a parable. Let's take this story of a judge and a widow, for instance.

According to some interpreters, the judge represents God. And the widow represents believers. Represents *us*!

But wait a minute. How well does this analogy really hold up? First of all, this judge is unjust. And we know something about the nature and the character of God—we know our God to be the diametrical opposite. Second, this judge doesn't care *anything* about other people. But we know that God makes human creatures in God's image and that God loves each one. And third, the widow in this story keeps badgering the judge until he's so sick of her that he gives in and grants her the justice she seeks.

Now what do you think? Are we to pattern our relationship with God after the relationship of this widow to an unjust judge? Is this really what our prayer life is supposed to look like? We're supposed to keep pestering God, like pesky gnats, until God's had enough and gives us what we want just to shut us up?

My sisters and brothers, it seems to me that we can consider this parable from another perspective. We can turn it around. We

can turn it over. We can look at it in a different light. We can turn it upside-down.

And when we do, a question emerges, a question we need to ask ourselves: When we look at this persistent widow, could we be seeing a picture of the God we worship and serve? Because this almighty God, this all-powerful God, like a widow, becomes *vulnerable*—when God comes to earth and puts on human flesh and experiences mocking and humiliation and suffering and even death. It's God's limitless love that makes God vulnerable. And it's the tender love of this God that goes out to the world's most vulnerable ones.

It's because of this great and tender love that our God is relentless in the pursuit of justice. Like the widow in Jesus' story, God persists in seeking justice. God's deep, deep concern for the defenseless and the outcast and the forgotten threads its way all through the tapestry of Scripture.

We first hear of God's desire for justice in the Bible's opening books: in Torah, in the instruction God gives Israel after the deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Torah is the way of being God's people in the world. A way of faithfulness. A way of loving-kindness. A way of compassion. A way for Israel—and the

church—to live in blessed *Shalom*. This morning we've celebrated with the psalmist as he sings thanksgiving for the gift and goodness of God's way of living. And at the center of God's good intention for God's children, at the center of Torah, lies the care of the vulnerable. The widow. The orphan. The immigrant.

Our God has a passion for the least and the last. Our God has a passion for those who stand in need. Our God has a passion for justice. When we open our Bibles to the Old Testament, we notice how frequently the word *justice* appears.

But at some point, we close the Bible. And we pick up the morning paper or turn on the evening news. And what we read and hear overwhelms us. This world's horrific injustices play in our heads like a broken record, again and again. Widespread hunger. Crippling poverty. Systemic exploitation. Human trafficking. Brutal violence. So much injustice. In our communities. In our nation. Around the earth.

Even if we haven't become numb to these wrongs, we tend to think: *I'm just one person—what can I do?* So we go right on about business as usual. That is, until we happen to look in a mirror. And we're dismayed to see that, as Robert Dunham observes, the face looking back at us is somehow beginning to

resemble the face of the unjust judge. And that's *so* not who we want to be!

For we are followers of the One who has come to make the world just. We bear his name. We're Christians. And we are the people called Methodists! Belton Joyner reminds us that we stand in a tradition historically "engaged in works for justice...The 1908 Methodist Episcopal Church adopted a Social Creed, an endeavor aimed at sensitizing Methodists to places in the world where there were hurts to be healed, peace to be sought, equal rights to be gained, social evils to be fought, and prophetic witness to be made."

All these efforts begin with prayer. Always these efforts are undergirded by prayer. Prayer that fills our every moment and keeps us from losing heart. Prayer that becomes as natural as breathing. Prayer that opens us to the task before us. Prayer that transforms us into who God created us to be. Prayer that's intimate conversation. Prayer that's communion. Prayer that is both speaking and listening.

One of the ways we listen to God's voice is through sacred Scripture. In Luke's Gospel, we hear God's voice in Jesus' rebuke: *Woe to you, Pharisees! For you...neglect justice and the*

love of God; it is these that you ought to have practiced...! In the words of the prophets, we hear God's voice. In the cry of Amos, we hear God's voice: *Let justice roll down like waters!* In the charge of Micah, we hear God's voice: *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice...?*

This is what the Lord requires of you. To be a seeker of justice! Like a determined widow, God keeps asking you to make justice the priority of your life. To make things right. To make this world a better place. To *leave* this world a better place than you found it. In some small way—in any way you can—to make God's desired *Shalom* a more tangible reality each day. To bring God's reign on earth closer with every passing day.

To do justice in the name of Jesus Christ. Who laid down his life for you and me so that we might be reconciled with a just and loving God. We are the hands of this One who seeks justice. We are the feet of this One who seeks justice. And we are called to speak the words and to do the work of this One who seeks justice.

When the Son of Man returns, will he find that we have been faithful to our task?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.