

Parables are supposed to be provocative, and this one certainly is. This one is provocative in many ways, not least of which is provoking us to reconsider how we are supposed to hear parables. We tend to think that a parable must have one main point, must mean exactly one thing, teach one particular lesson that we're meant to take away and live by. Not that that stops preachers who believe that from going off on extensive tangents on the details of first-century economics, agriculture, and society, often with little scholarship to back them up.

For instance, I myself have preached about how widows in Jesus's day had no rights, no power, no legal personhood. But that's not true. Widows certainly could be poor and vulnerable, but the whole premise of this parable is that a widow can represent herself in court, as a legal person. And even if you downplay that as creative license in a fictional story, there are Biblical examples of real-life widows who owned property and engaged in economic activity like anyone else.

Another mistake we make about parables is assuming that one character "has to" represent God. Although that's hard to avoid when the narration reinforces this mistake. St. Luke tells us that this parable is "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." That leads us to assume that the character being petitioned represents God. But as much as I love St. Luke, and I think his Gospel might be my favorite, I have to point out that he quotes Jesus himself explaining the meaning of the parable, and it doesn't quite match up. Jesus says that God is *not* like the unjust judge: God is deeply caring, which is a relief, and also lines up better with, you know, everything else Jesus teaches.

Parables are much more interesting, and edifying, if they provoke us to consider many possible points, and a good way to start is to consider how characters are and are not like God. The idea that God is like the unjust judge has some merit. God is described elsewhere in Scripture as judging — although I should point out that just because God might judge humanity to be sinful, it doesn't follow that God "has to" respond with punishment. Human judges can and do show mercy, so how much more with God? Also, while a human being who neither fears God nor respects people is probably bad news, it seems reasonable that God does not fear God. And while we know that God loves humanity, we also know that God is sovereign, not subservient to humanity. Well, Jesus did come among us as one who serves, but you get my point.

At times God might indeed seem to us like an unjust judge. God's grace, love, justice, and generosity are limitless, but they *appear* to be limited, for two reasons. One is that God respects the autonomy of both human wills and the laws of nature; this respect can only have meaning when it includes respecting decisions and outcomes that God does not want. Therefore, God's interventions tend to be subtle, targeted, and rare. The other reason is that limitations are inherent in a material universe; the earth simply could not sustain everyone having everything they want; we can't all be first in line. In this world, there can be situations where there are only bad options. (If you've attended as many Vestry meetings as I have, you know *that's* true.) Scripture teaches

us that only at the end of time will God set *all* things right. Only in heaven can we truly know and experience the fullness of what God intends for us. This very lucky congregation will get to explore that idea in the services of the Hallowtide Triduum.

OK, so, what about the widow? She seems like the hero of the story, but what she asks for, the Greek word that is translated “justice,” can just as fairly be translated “vengeance.” And I know I don’t appreciate being badgered — that makes me less likely to do what someone wants, not more. But we already knew *I’m* not like God. However, could the widow be like God? Biblical scholar D. Mark Davis makes precisely this point: “God sends prophets to speak a word of truth, to demand justice, to call for vindication. They are often ignored, silenced, or killed. God sends another. They speak for God: ‘Thus says the Lord.’ And those who fear neither God nor humans — people without conscience or a regard for the moral law — ignore them. In the end, justice can prevail, but it prevails because God’s people persistently speak the truth. The widow *is* how God operates, particularly through a community of truth-tellers.”\*

And that brings us to another misconception about this parable. We assume it’s about our relationship with God as individuals, which is an easy assumption to make when the parable only has two characters. Our relationship with God might feel like a strictly private matter, like the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. But that story is set in a relational context. Jacob had sent his family away because he was anticipating a confrontation with his brother Esau, whom he had cheated. The angel gives Jacob a taste of his own medicine and then blesses him, and he goes on to be reconciled with his brother.

One of the few things ancient people agreed on widely was that spiritual relationships are always, inherently, communal. Individuality was important, and Jewish prophets and even Jesus himself would sometimes go off on their own to pray, but that was always because of their relationships with others. And here we see that Jesus told this parable to his followers as a group, and set it in a court, a public forum.

Furthermore, even if widows did have diminished economic, and social standing, they had elevated religious standing. For example, Exodus [22:22-23] says, “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.” Deuteronomy [10:17-18] says, “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.” But these verses only matter — the widow, orphan, and stranger only get their due — if the community is faithful. Faith, grace, and community are inseparable.

As uncomfortable as it might be, we have to be honest and remember that persistence in our spiritual lives encompasses far more than private prayer. And even private prayer isn’t just about us getting what we want, it also keeps us oriented towards God, as we should be. Much better that we focus on God as the one who gives grace

and defines justice, rather than on society, the media, or the state. We tend to ask God, “What have you done for me lately,” even though we know that the best things God will do for us lie ahead. And that’s not so bad, so long as we who don’t have all the time in the world, also consider what we have done for God lately.

Jesus probably wouldn’t have had to teach his followers to keep asking for the things they want; that comes naturally enough. But being persistent in the communal life to which he calls us, staying connected to God and to our community of faith, and asking what God is calling us to do — that, we need to hear. Thus, our persistence also includes corporate worship and acts that glorify God by responding to his calls, acts of outreach, evangelism, and stewardship.

Whether we feel like God has personally granted us justice or not, we still have excellent reason to persist in the life to which God calls us. Only by staying focused on that relational life do our individual lives come into focus. The divine order that God offers us gives us things the world cannot give; among them, a balance between confidence and humility, love of self and love of neighbor, individual and common good.

As we all consider what our individual responses will be to this year’s stewardship drive, we need to remember that our response will strengthen or weaken our communal life. Since parables can have multiple meanings, the widow and the judge can also represent conflicting tendencies within ourselves. If we push forward with our own generosity, with the same zeal that the widow exemplified, then the unjust judges of selfishness and fear don’t stand a chance, and we will operate a bit like God operates, quickly building up a blessed community that is in turn a blessing to many others.

\*<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/10/impunity-and-persistence.html> (emphasis added)