

## JESUS BRINGS A WISE MAN TO HIS KNEES

Luke 18: 1-8

Alayna K. Shalom

October 21, 2007

Jesus tells the parable in today's Gospel passage in order to teach us how to "pray always and not lose heart". Readers almost always interpret this parable with the widow as the persistently praying one and the judge as God. The widow is most likely poor, disowned by her in-laws and uneducated, and she might have children to feed. The judge is (typically) male, educated, respected and probably wealthy, if not at least comfortable. The outcome of the parable suggests a triumph for the widow, the "underdog", (even possibly) over the powerful judge. The benevolent action of the judge represents the benevolence of God, and it sometimes represents social justice, in response to the widow's persistence. Thus it seems that the widow gives us the exemplary prayer.

The characterization of the widow and the judge given to them by Jesus further accentuates the roles of these two. The judge lacks both respect for people and fear of God. He is a stern, probably older, probably conservative man (caution: how, then could Jesus mean this judge to represent God? I have often wondered) The plaintiff is not only female but also a widow; she is most likely outcast socially, emotionally and economically, a typical "victim" of society. It is unusual for someone of the widow's social standing to assert herself in a court of law. It is only RIGHT that she gets what she needs, not only because she is a disadvantaged victim but because she is also atypically bold in her approach to the judge. Jesus is telling us to be bold in our faith, especially when we consider ourselves victims of injustice, and God will hear us and grant our petition. *Jesus also tells us, however, to pray like the judge to God who is like the widow.*

The judge looks every bit the bad guy. The only details Jesus gives about him is that he neither fears God nor respects people. Arrogant, rude, lonely, angry, power-driven. Maybe even self-righteous and narrow-minded. Jesus rolls into one, in the judge's personality, some of humanity's least desirable traits. The judge's arrogance and lack of respect are universal and non-biased; they affect every one of us at some time, to some degree.

We are all this judge from time to time. First, we are constantly judging. God creates humankind in God's own image. We, like God, judge. (Can we judge without being judgmental? Maybe the only way to do this is to judge ourselves and no one else!) We are BORN TO JUDGE. Critical thinking is particular to the human race. We, Jesus says, are not only the widow. We are also the judge. In our sin, we exile ourselves from God and others, lacking both fear and respect as we *misuse* the gift of judgment.

The widow is famous for her bold faithfulness. *However, the judge shows us yet another way to be faithful.* He refuses the widow's request at first. The parable never offers an explanation for his refusal. One might guess that the judge refuses simply to play out his power over yet another of his "subjects". "Maybe he's a misogynist!! Maybe someone paid him off!! Maybe it's simply due to his lack of respect for humanity!

The judge surprises us, though. He acknowledges his lack of fear of God and respect for others. This insight into self is a high form of wisdom, for which judges are recognized. Arrogance and self-reflection are usually mutually exclusive, but not in this case. The judge admits two of his major flaws, a most uncharacteristic gesture (both for judges and for all people). What's more, the judge uses this insight in a constructive (and wise) way. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, the judge uses his new insight in resolving the widow's case. Instead of getting angry at his parents for a poor upbringing, the judge "knows himself" and uses this knowledge to CHANGE HIS MIND. He changes his mind about (1) fitting in to his usual pattern of disrespect for God and others and (2) the widow's request. The judge REPENTS, in other words.

Jesus challenges us to know ourselves like the judge knows himself. We can never know ourselves completely. Life changes us every moment and over time, and even if we remained the same, we could never plumb the depths nor scale the heights nor explore the vastness of the persons we are. But God gives us moments in which to know ourselves in a specific way, about a specific trait, along with opportunities to choose how to use this trait. What does one do when realizing, at a party, that one is shy? What does one do upon knowing that one wants to be in charge ... over one's children? Or spouse? Or colleagues?

If we follow the judge's course of action, we can use our power to CHANGE OUR MINDS about the "widow" (i.e., the issue/ the person/ the decision) currently in front of us. We can step back and assess the situation, the other person(s) involved, *and especially ourselves and our motives*. We can, and are called to, exercise our decision-making power and avoid reacting.

What's the connection between the judge's role and Jesus Christ's intention to teach us to "pray always and not lose heart"? It seems that the widow is praying always and not losing heart. However, the judge's self-reflection is a most important form of prayer. We usually think of prayer as petition or praise. Let's also remember confession. The judge's "know thyself" prayer is a confession. Its power leads the judge to repent. The judge's prayer power is not as obvious as that of the widow. The judge's prayer power is more subtle, and it is also wise. The judge does not say, in so many words, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" The judge DOES acknowledge the driving forces of his personality which are affecting him as he considers the widow. He refrains from reacting. He takes a moment to step back and assess ... NOT the situation, which would be the typical "rational" approach, but ... HIMSELF. After a simple and deep statement of self-knowledge, the judge decides to show LOVE. The judge might not even realize that love is in this equation, and few if any readers might choose to apply this concept to this man's actions. But LOVE he does. The judge reaches beyond his own limitations to see the widow's request for what it is ... FAIR ... and to grant the request. (1Cor13: "Love does not insist on having its own way.") This wise man falls to his knees in a moment of revelation, just like the Three Wise Ones fell to their knees at Jesus' birth. The judge changes his mind in faith. He repents. He takes a new course of action based on a new course of thought.

I have intentionally focused on the judge to the exclusion of the widow. She always gets the attention as the faithful praying one. Readers always understand the judge as God. Now that we see the surprisingly prayerful judge, let's look at the unexpected God-like qualities of the widow.

Yes, the judge does acknowledge some of his shortcomings. Yes, the judge does change his mind. Yes, the judge does grant justice to the widow. If we focus exclusively on the judge, we forget that he (like us) can't do these things in a vacuum. The widow, in

spite of the judge's initial refusals, keeps going back to the judge with her request. The widow's persistence not only eventually gets her what she wants, but *even more importantly*, allows the judge the time and space he needs to make a radical change. If the widow were to give up at any point in the story, the judge would not have this opportunity to change his mind. The widow persists in relating to the judge according to what she wants. The relationship, albeit business-related, endures, and justice thrives.

Just as the judge represents us in confession and repentance, so the widow represents God. The typical interpretation of this parable is *upended*. The widow, a most unlikely and unexpected candidate, plays the role of God. How does the widow exhibit Godlike qualities? Or should we ask, how does God come to us in the form of this widow? The widow uses her still, small voice to request justice, and she repeats this request. She goes back to the judge with the same request even after she has been denied justice. When is God denied justice? What does God do with the eternal search for justice? Does God give up?

How many times do we hear God's voice asking for justice, God's voice repetitive, still and small, and God wanting to relate to us? In a different parable, Jesus says that He is clothed when naked, fed when hungry, i.e. cared for, whenever we clothe any who are naked, feed any who are hungry, care for any of the vulnerable. Jesus comes to us in many forms, especially the vulnerable ones. It is our job to listen to the voice of the vulnerable, justice-seeking God and to know ourselves. It is our job to, in spite of any personal difficulties we need to overcome (like the judge), recognize the call for justice and grant it ... that is, to do God's will ... even though doing so feels out of character for us. It is our job to credit the lowliest, most vulnerable aspects of even ourselves with the persistence and fairness and relational nature we keep inside. God would have it no other way. It is our job to look for God, in the most unexpected places and people.

As we take Communion today, let us thank God—the wise widow—for Jesus Christ who gives us this parable. Let us thank God for the repenting judge and for our own lives and the insights about ourselves that God gives us. Let us thank God for Jesus' birth, life and ministry, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and the promise of His second coming, as our Lord and Savior. **AMEN.**