

On the Road to Justice

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Luke 18:1-8

A popular class in high school was called “Personal Law.” The culmination of the class was a mock trial, held in the school auditorium, in front of a big audience. I was the judge. I remember the case – a lawnmower ran over a piece of wire. An injury ensued and the injured sued the homeowner for negligence. I don’t remember the outcome; I do remember banging the gavel. The end of my legal career.

The beauty of Jesus’ parables is that they invite us into interpretation, to imagination – they are stories, after all. So we don’t know the details of this morning’s parable, that is as much about the judge as it is the widow arguing before him. We do know Jesus told it to help us to be persistent in our praying, and not to lose heart. Remember that. But few details. The judge was unjust, we know that. “Unrighteous” is a better translation, though even then we don’t know exactly what that means. Nor do we know the nature of the complaint.

We do know that a widow had very little social standing period, let alone before the legal system, where she could find no man to plead her case. Her risk and vulnerability are pronounced. The deck is stacked against her. She asks for justice. Maybe it’s a financial matter. Maybe a property matter. Maybe an inheritance. We don’t know – Jesus invites us to imagine.

She asks for justice, but, really, the word is better translated as vindication, or even vengeance. That would be a good conversation upstairs at Campbell’s Place – what does justice look like legally, politically, and how does that square with what justice looks like biblically, theologically.

Grant me justice, the woman insisted. The unjust judge refused, repeatedly. Then he thought about it. I have no reason to change my mind, except for this woman’s persistence. Her persistence; her constant hassling, her relentlessness and

stubbornness and tenacity has worn me out and worn me down. I will grant her justice.

Remember that this is a parable about prayer, and not losing heart. Jesus concludes – won't God grant justice to the ones who cry out day and night. God will grant justice, Jesus says. And still, where is your faith? Even with this promise of justice, you act as if you do not believe it.

I am not sure always what to make of this – does God give us what we want simply because we are incredibly accomplished whiners, coming back again and again until we get our way. I don't think so. Jesus tells the story as a way to say that God is so much more than that.

Chelsey Harmon wonders what we learn about God from this judge. "If this judge," she writes, "who is at the other end of the spectrum of what we know God's character to be, if *this* judge provides justice, then how much more can we trust our God to make justice?"

Harmon concludes that "from the very beginning we know that God does not need to be pestered as the unjust judge was in order to do the right thing. We can trust that God will bring justice and is not delaying. At alternate times in our lives, these can be words of hope and comfort and words of warning which provoke us to repentance."

Our Matthew 25 commitment is about justice. Three focal points – dismantling structural racism, eradicating systemic poverty, building congregational vitality. Justice. Working to create a level playing field for those whom God loves who are not afforded justice because of the color of their skin or the circumstances of their lives, or both.

The entry point from Matthew 25 is simple – whenever we see someone hungry, thirsty, unwelcome, naked, sick, imprisoned, we see Jesus. And we work persistently, relentlessly, to meet that need.

It is about care and compassion – when someone is bleeding, you tend to the wound. But it is also about justice, about trying to prevent that wound from happening in the first place, about preventing cancer rather than developing better treatments, about imagining a world absent of racism rather than seeking

to repair its damage, about providing equitable work and housing opportunities rather than continually reacting to a broken system.

It is about justice, about catching up with the God of justice who is ever before us, leading us on, inspiring us to imagine, and work for, a different kind of world than one marked by structural racism and systemic poverty.

In the meantime, we appear before the judge, and we plead. In the meantime, we make ziti casseroles to feed hungry neighbors, we make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to feed food insecure neighbors, we hammer rebar into the ground and display t-shirts to remember those killed, senselessly, by guns and to move the needle just a bit. In the meantime, this is what we do when we see Jesus, all the while imagining the day when the Son of Man comes, and will find faith on earth. Amen.