

22 Pentecost Yr C, 16/10/2016
Lk 18:1-8
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Do not lose heart”

Prayer, not losing heart, and justice. In today’s gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a judge who “neither feared God nor had respect for people, and “a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’”

One wonders how the judge became a judge in the first place. Did he climb the ladder because of his deceitfulness and politicking? Did he bribe some and accept bribes from others? Was he in cahoots with the rich and powerful and willing to do anything for them to become a judge and remain a judge? We don’t really know, yet one does wonder how a person could become a judge and remain a judge if they failed to fear God or respect people.

However he got to be a judge we’re told that he had little time for this persistent widow—thinking that if he’d ignore her long enough she would give up and leave him in peace. The widow didn’t give up though. Rather, she kept showing up at his door, or in the courtroom and stating her case to the judge. Notice that we’re not told what the nature of the case is—most likely she didn’t have enough money to hire a lawyer to defend her in court. She must have believed that her case was a just one and an urgent one; since she keeps pestering the judge. In biblical times, widows, living in a patriarchal society could become very poor and destitute if they didn’t have an elder son or any other male relatives in the family who were willing to look after the widow. The widow couldn’t depend on a pension or welfare check every month to keep a roof over her head and put bread on the table. So unless a widow had a responsible and loving male family member or a decent job of some kind, she would most likely be living in poverty. In biblical times because widows were vulnerable, God’s people were instructed to provide and care for them.

Coming back to the parable then, that is likely the reason why the widow is so persistent—she needed help sooner than later, otherwise her situation would become extremely desperate and hopeless. All the more reason for the widow to stick with it, not to lose heart.

So the judge does finally hear her case and give her justice—albeit for the selfish motive that it is wearing him down, not because he cares two hoots about the widow or fears God or respects other people. No, only because he can get the widow off his back if he gives her justice.

Jesus then being the Jewish rabbi that he is, employs a line of reasoning known as from the lesser to the greater in order to drive home his point. Jesus goes on to say if a corrupt, scoundrel of a judge is capable of granting justice only out of his own selfish interests then, how much more will “God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”

As much as I would agree with Jesus that God, being totally loving and totally just is likely to grant justice way better than any corrupt and selfish judge; there are, I must confess a couple of things about this parable that trouble me.

One thing that troubles me about the parable is the line of thought that if only a person persists in prayer they will get what they want. I’m not convinced of that. Why? Because persistent praying may not pay off in a consistent way for everyone who prays the same way; and that may lead others to make conclusions that are incorrect, judgemental and hurtful. For example, one person may pray until they’re blue in the face for a long, long time to be healed of cancer, yet God does not heal them and they die an early death. On the other hand, a neighbour of that person may also have cancer and pray only once to be healed of it and God does seem to answer their prayer. They are cancer free and live to a ripe old age. Why does God not heal the one person who prayed persistently for a long, long time yet the second person is healed? I don’t know why. The answer that some people of faith give

to such questions is: Well, obviously the first person either prayed the wrong prayer or did not have enough faith that God would heal them. I think that kind of answer is wrong and far too simple. It is not up to us to judge another person's faith or lack of faith—only God ultimately knows that.

The other problem I have with Jesus' words in the parable about God quickly granting justice is that in some cases that is not true. For some people, justice takes a long time to come. Worse yet, sometimes it seems like justice never comes.

Here in Alberta, one example of justice being denied is that of the Lubicon Cree Nation.

The Nation has been embroiled with the Government of Canada regarding disputed land claims for decades. . In 1899, a government party visited northern Alberta for the arranged large-scale surrender of the Lubicon lands. However, many of the Lubicon people were never contacted and continued to live in their traditional ways, by hunting and gathering on the land. During the 1970 liquid gold rush, the province of Alberta leased areas of the Lubicon lands for resource exploration and exploitation. The oil, gas, and lumber industry on Lubicon territory have caused damaging repercussions on the natural environment, the Lubicon culture and people. Amnesty International has commented on the struggle of the Lubicon by issuing a report imploring the Canadian government to respect the land rights of the Lubicon. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has found Canada in violation of article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. They have repeated their call for Canada to take immediate action to avoid irreparable damage. This call was first made by the UN Human Rights Committee in 1990 in a case known as Lubicon Lake Band v Canada and was repeated in 2003 and 2006. This struggle has been described in a book, *Last Stand of the Lubicon Cree*, by John Goddard. Repeated attempts to gerrymander and politically overthrow Lubicon leadership especially that led by internationally renowned Chief Bernard Ominayak have been organized

by the Government of Canada and the Province of Alberta and documented by the Lubicon Lake Nation.¹

So it seems that persistence does not always pay off; for the Lubicon justice has been delayed for far too long.

What, then, is Jesus teaching us in this parable? Well, I think if we read the first and last verses of the parable, we can come up with an answer. The point is perhaps less about getting what we want in prayer and more about not losing heart when we pray and not losing faith over the long haul. God's concept of time, God's timing is not always the same as ours. The Bible says one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day in God's eyes. God's idea of quickly and ours are most likely two different things. So keep praying, do not lose heart, do not lose faith. God will answer your prayers and grant justice; however it may not be today or tomorrow and it may be a justice that looks much different than the way we see it or desire it. God is a God of justice and eventually, in God's own time and in God's own way, God will grant justice.

1 Wikipedia article, "Lubicon Lake Indian Nation, at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lubicon_Lake_Indian_Nation>.