

The Persistent Widow

A sermon preached by Juris Rubenis in Washington D.C. in November 2007

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Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said: "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, „Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not 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. And yet, when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18: 1-8)

We must admit, that this is one of Jesus' more unusual parables, that from the very start poses numerous questions – for example: Are we really being asked to understand the relationship between God and pray-er as similar to the relationship between an unhappy widow and an unjust judge? Is this not a shocking comparison? If we weren't reading it in the New Testament, but rather somewhere else, we might even call it an ungodly comparison.

The unjust, cynical, shameless judge, as he is portrayed in this concise parable, who consciously lives with the thought: „I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone,” doesn't grant the widow's request because he feels for her. No. It is a cold and calculated decision. He has simply become sick and tired of the widow and her pleading – and he makes a decision in her case in order to finally be rid of her. „I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” – or as it is written in other ancient texts: „so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.” Actually, more precisely translated from Greek, the judge says: so she doesn't come and tear out my eyes.

Does Jesus want to hold up as an example of an aggressive person, who brings his complaints to every possible office? Who, if necessary, will go to every high ranking official until every last one of them is sick and tired of him – thus succeeding in having his case decided on, although not because he is right, but because they shamelessly just want to get rid of him. Is Jesus saying that this is a positive image of a person praying – that God hears you only when you act aggressively, demandingly, shamelessly? That only those kind of people will win? If you are too quiet, too polite, then don't even think about it!? Yes, indeed – how should we understand such a paradoxical parable?

I suppose we must try again to understand the parable – by looking deeper into our selves and remembering that Jesus' parables aren't some sort of passionless, formal retelling of events – but rather descriptions of feelings and emotional experiences that we recognize with our souls. What does this parable say to us if we perceive it as an image of our souls?

First of all we recognize one of life's most characteristic traits – helplessness. Maybe when we are young, nothing seems impossible – but, as we grow older, we get to know the world better – and in so many situations we experience that the world is stronger than we are. There are infinitely many injustices in the world, that exist simply because they are so very, very much stronger than you. And often you can only helplessly observe them. There are high walls built around us, that it is hopeless to think of breaking through. We haven't built these walls ourselves, we don't want them, but we are too helpless in front of them. These walls have various names: poverty, illness, betrayal by trusted friends, helplessness in the face of violence, guilt about the past, sin.

That all can only evoke paralyzing fear. Especially when every possible tool has been tried, but the walls are still standing. Then we begin to sense, and indeed recognize, this one woman's – a poor widow's – situation.

A widow – in those times a person without any support! – in front of an arbitrary and corrupt judge – can there be a more poignant image of the inner helplessness we feel? Haven't we often felt just as helpless, vulnerable, lonely in this world full of injustices as the poor widow in court without support, without even a lawyer? How can we defend our rights against tyrants, who seemingly go without punishment?

So, in a state of such uncertainty, doesn't the one Judge, to whom you could still turn – God – also seem like an arbitrary power not interested in your case? Why must I suffer so much injustice, why must I experience so much pain? Isn't it because God is probably not a just judge of the world either, but rather someone for whom I – with my small life—am of no interest whatsoever! And if so, then is it at all worth my time to search for justice in this unjust world, where everything and everyone, even God the Judge, are unjust? How many people haven't felt that? Life – one big injustice.

And yet, Jesus uses this parable not to legitimize or defend injustice and aggression, but rather to very clearly say that He knows – indeed knows very well – what is going on in our souls. He knows that to one who suffers the world can truly look like that. One can even see God so disfigured (it's a significant image: a judge, that doesn't fear God or humans), as God, who is in conflict with God's self, who denies Himself! And Jesus says – the only thing that you can do, the only thing that is left for you to do – is to pray. There are no other options. Pray, in the beginning, as if praying to that same unjust judge. But can that help? Is it not a foolish endeavor to beseech such a judge – is it not a waste of time?

Often – in the beginning – prayer in this world does seem like a hopeless, absurd, foolish endeavor, that can't change anything. They are, after all, only words! Who hasn't at the start thought that way? But Jesus says: no, this is the point at which your case, your life, your fate is decided. Be ready to do so in any case. If your life is still significant to you – do so! Encircled by injustices, surrounded by high walls. Do not give up, but instead pick up a new tool, that you haven't ever before really used: prayer.

Jesus wants to say: in this helplessness there is only one thing that works – prayer. The most important things in your life you can take care of only by praying, being in dialogue with God. There – and not in the search for backing and guarantees of this world – but before God your case, your life, your destiny is decided. The parable wants to affirm, that only prayer is capable of the impossible. Prayer is the way to break through the thick walls of injustice; prayer is the only thing that changes your life. Your soul has been given this huge opportunity – although in the beginning it can seem like a poor, hopeless widow in front of a world of injustices.

Prayer can help you break through the deformed images of this world, through the kingdom of distorting mirrors – until you get to the Judge – God, as He truly is. Then you discover, that God is not an unjust autocrat, uninterested in your case, but rather your Father, who loves you very much and wants to give you everything, so that you may have a fulfilled life.

Prayer is the way to truly find God; it helps you recognize that God is not one of the many causes of fear, but Love, that is infinitely interested in your case. Be certain, it will be justly decided. “I tell you, he will quickly grant justice.” Help will arrive sooner than we dare to hope, if only you pray and do not lose heart. If only your prayer is persistent, if only it is something that you truly do, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might, mind and will.

Let’s make note of the closing sentence: “And yet, when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?”

We often have doubts about God’s power and readiness to help. We have doubts about God Himself. But Jesus says: it would be better to turn your critical attitudes towards your own faith. He – the one who has said that nothing is impossible for faith, who has taught us to pray, for whom nothing is unattainable, asks: Do you really see the opportunities given to you? Not only the injustices in your life, but the opportunities as well?

Will He find such faith and such prayer when he comes? Would he find such faith in our midst, in me, if He came now, today? Or would He find only lives disfigured by fear, that can’t even see God as not disfigured?

God wants to help. This parable states that clearly. He is different, not at all what we often think He is. The only question is – do we want to believe in His help and are we ready to pray for it without losing heart?