

God the Anti-Hero Judge, Our Only Hope.

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Pray with me if you will. God, grant us justice. Grant us persistence in times of strife and pain and oppression. And most of all, make us aware of your amazing grace, which is, dare I say, our only hope. All of this we pray in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Today's reading, from Luke's version of the gospel – and it only appears in Luke's gospel – is one of Jesus' parables; the so-called parable of the persistent widow,

The story is set up as being about the need to pray and not lose heart. In it, a widow approaches a judge who is reluctant to even give her the time of day. He doesn't get God or respect humans, we're told. *She* has an opponent and desires justice. Eventually, the judge gets worn down by her and concedes to her request... *[pause]*

Now, one read on this story might likely emphasize the persistence against systems of oppression. Hold out, disturb the peace – and justice will come. Which is good – the activist me loves that one. It also ties into the early experience of the church. Historians tell us that the early church had very few, if any, treatises on evangelism or church growth – but many, many on patience, perseverance and persistence. Which makes sense when you're a tiny illegal Jewish sect living in the very heart of the Roman empire...

Another take might emphasize the piety of the woman – her prayer, her and faithfulness. Also, great. The call to spiritual practice in the face of personal pain, loss and challenge. The contemplatives among us might be drawn to this. This is after all, we're reminded, a parable about the need to pray & to not lose heart.

And today, I suggest that both of these have a good and rightful place in our prayerful and thoughtful engagement with the text & in what it calls us into.

However, I do wonder if there isn't a yet third way to consider the text; one which might have us consider the person of the judge rather than just focusing on the actions of the widow. And so it is, today, that I want us to ask the question – what might this text, if anything at all, reveal to us about the very nature of God?

But a slight detour East before we even attempt to break open that question. For those of you who might have delved into the practices of various religious traditions, you might know of the koan (k-o-a-n - it's often spelled) in the Zen tradition of Buddhism.

In that practice, a teacher will say a line or tell a story or ask a seemingly unanswerable, paradoxical question in order to re-orient the student into something deeper about their own nature. Some students might spend weeks, years, an entire lifetime meditating on the koan their teacher has presented. The most famous koan in the west is *what's the sound of one hand clapping?*

I don't know about you, but as a Jesus-follower, I often hear his parables - and my first impulse is to want to hear them as either a cut and dry morality tale - or as a straight-ahead allegory.

Today, I'd like to suggest that, in some ways, Jesus' use of these little stories, invoking situations or images that would be familiar or relatable might be more like a koan; that is, a way to disrupt us in our expectations; to offer an open-ended question which provokes us into a deeper understanding of God and God's inbreaking reign - and even who we, ourselves are, in God's heart.

And so I wonder: What if, in telling this story, Jesus is actually seeking to disorient his disciples and his hearers into something so profound, so incredible that it promises to change us - and even the very created order? *[pause]*

In the eyes of the ancient cultures in which she lives, this widow - she's lost her spouse and thus her very status. Without a male advocate by her side, she's as good as dead. No rights. Not even personhood. For her to even approach a judge is unimaginable. And yet here she is, persistent, wearing him out with what he must imagine is her petty cause for justice. Jesus is brilliant in the contrasts between the two characters; powerless and powerful, one without status or rights and one who is given the very power to administer justice.

And at the heart of what I want, perhaps provocatively, to break open today is to ask this question: Is this judge a stand-in for God in this story?

Now, I don't know about you - but even as my mind says 'no way - this ain't my God - after all, we're told that the judge neither fears God, nor respects people. And he kind of seems like, well, an idiot in how he responds and delays in justice...' *[pause]*

And yet... if I'm honest, I still have this tendency in my mind to go back and forth about whether this judge can, in some ways, be a 'fill-in' for a God figure. I'd suggest that this is actually one of the brilliant literary devices of this story and of Jesus' other parables. As our Teacher, Jesus, is provoking and prodding us toward a deeper understanding of the nature of God.

Our modern liberal sensitivities might bristle at the idea of God being a judge - never mind a seemingly bad one. But what if the point of this parable isn't just to call us to our own persistence or piety, as good as those are. But what if it is also to challenge our very notions and expectations of God - and who we are to God?

To read the story in this way, God as judge becomes a kind of anti-hero. Sure, there's the distasteful surface stuff the judge does - ignoring her, being annoyed, delaying. But perhaps this depiction calls us to stop saying who we think God should be - and in saying that this judge doesn't fear or live in awe God - this is a way of saying he's acting against the ways of corrupt religion.

What if this very judge is turning his back on what people perceive God to be – and on the ways of people which make the widow to be dead rather than a beloved child created in God's image with all the dignity that entails. What if this judge is actually a bit of an anti-hero in how the judge looks beyond the categories of widowhood or injustice into something even more radical, more profound, more human.

In this read, this is, in fact, a boundary breaking judge. And if we do read this as God, this is a God who gets the role of judge so wrong. In the 'wisdom' of ancient society, he shouldn't have even listened to her, but he does. And, in time, sure he gives justice. But he gives something even deeper. It's what our forebears in faith, and particularly our reformed forebears, called grace.

Again, we might say, why's he waiting? And this, of course, touches on the great question that only can be responded to with lament: how long O Lord? Where are you? It's to remind us that, even though we want things now, and things are desperate and we want to dictate the timeline, God will, ultimately, respond to the losers.

And looking back on the parables, it's all about the losers, isn't it? The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost prodigal son and now the widow who has lost her spouse and is as good as dead. And in all those stories the stand-ins for God are examples of an anti-hero who do the unthinkable, breaking what one 'should' do in terms of ethics or tradition or religion or even common sense.

Don't get me wrong - this isn't Jesus attempting to liberate a Judaism that is strict and religious and we Christians get it better. Instead, I'd suggest that he's living into the very call of his own prophets who, repeatedly say they desire mercy, not sacrifice, they don't desire offerings or ceremonies, but the release of the prisoners, the poor, the hungry, the oppressed. The widows, the orphans, the foreigners, the prodigals, the lost sheep. This is a God who chooses mercy over justice.

We hear it in his ministry from the moment Jesus begins his public ministry and unrolls the scroll temple - where he begins by quoting, or rather misquoting Isaiah, and then goes on to list the ways that God is an anti-hero through his own Hebrew history siding with the ones who don't quite fit the script as religion thinks it should.

All, yes through his ministry, he keeps the law. He doesn't eradicate one point – but comes to fulfil it. And in doing so, Jesus lives into the law in the way it was intended – that is, in grace and mercy.

And, this is perhaps the greatest scandal of all, that this is a God who steps down from the bench, and in time, becomes human and suffers death at the hands of empire.

When we think of the possible, God figures in the parables and hold me in contrast with each other, a pattern emerges. This is, in fact, an unjust God who, in spite of our failures, individually and collectively, opens up arms in love for us. This is a God who defies our expectations with lavish grace. As Robert Capon put it, 'like the

[parent] in the Prodigal son [parable, God] – just runs, falls on all our necks, the widows and yours and mine – and showers us with injudicious kisses simply because [God] wants to get the wet blankets off [God's] back and let the party begin'

Like the Koan's in the Zen tradition, this parable plays with our notions of time and who we expect God to be. It doesn't give us a clean or safe or easy answer, but it does break open the question which, I posit, lands us safely into a mercy and grace and love which transcends our abilities, our own own goodness, our privileges, even our own persistence and prayers.

God will get me my justice against my opponent, right? And, in the end, the text affirms that God will do that: "God will grant justice to them"

But then, again, in true Koan fashion, the story ends with a question: "even still, will that justice granting God find faith on earth?" It's a bit of a pinprick reminder on the finger of our need to want perfect justice or even retribution. A call to an even deeper conception of faith beyond being a good or just person.

Even as we are all called to live in this ecology of grace, we still have a nature to want to call our enemies names on social media. To live in the algo rhythms of our echo-chambers. We want to stand on our own ideological soapboxes be they left or right. "Everybody wants to see justice done on somebody else" as the elder poet songwriter Bruce Cockburn one sang.

Don't get me wrong, there is a time for justice. There is a place to be persistent and pray. I think that's the beautiful paradox of this text. In 8 short verses we have the dual call to prayer and action persistence toward justice.

AND - what if in these same 8 verses, Jesus is calling us to something even deeper? What if, through the lens of his own incarnation and crucifixion, he's calling us to a deep place of letting go, a place of faith in bigger Story. What if Jesus is calling us into a grace which operates beyond beyond all we do or don't do.

You may or may not 'buy' this third way of reading the text – but maybe that's the point. What does this parable, this koan, break open in terms of the questions about the nature of God and who you are to God? Even if you don't by this take, perhaps this sermon can be a call to enter into that question.

And yet... what if, like that 'dead' widow, Jesus is calling us to a faith in the resurrection story, which is a new life that only comes through death... where all the death and violence and tears and pain are overcome by life. What if Jesus is calling us in our deepest humanity to trust in the power of the resurrection?

And what if that story is grace for everyone, especially the losers like you and me?

This is counter to all the wisdom of the world, and I would suggest is at the very heart and mystery of our faith. Do we, too, dare risk to be aware of God's grace all around us. A grace which then opens us to pray and to not lose heart - even as we look at the brokenness and injustice everywhere and persistently cry, how long O Lord? *Amen.*