

This judge is a real peach, isn't he? He's self-absorbed, unkind, and he has no shame or respect for the people he is charged with serving. He's a public official entrusted to uphold Jewish law; law that obligated him to take care of people on the margins of society, widows in particular. A law that warned of a curse for those who *prevent* justice to widows, and if a judge did not serve, God was expected to come to the aid of widows as the over-riding jurisdiction.

A widow in first century Palestine was among the most vulnerable of people. The Hebrew word we translate as "widow" means "silent one" or "one unable to speak" because they were not legally allowed to speak publicly on their own behalf. That the widow in Luke's parable speaks means that she is utterly alone with no one to advocate for her, and she is desperate.

But we lose something essential when we hear this parable only through ears trained by Western cultures and languages. You see, there is an intriguing cultural background that adds to the complexity of this simple parable; a cultural background that is still active.

Let me tell you a story. Back in the mid-80s, my friend Bernardetta had a sister stuck in Lebanon. Vida had married and divorced a Lebanese national and shortly after the attack on the US Embassy in Beirut, Vida and Bernardetta started trying to get Vida to the States. Vida was an Italian citizen so, although she had a valid U.S. work visa, our own government could not help much. Red tape, bureaucracy and her ex-husband's protests made leaving difficult. The lingering Lebanese civil war made it nearly impossible.

Bernardetta made several frustrating trips back and forth, making tiny moves of progress, but coming back to the States without her sister time after time. Until the last trip. Vida's ex-husband was holding her in a house with several other men and when Bernardetta arrived, months of frustration just boiled over.

She launched a verbal flood at the ex-husband, expressing her outrage at his behavior, at how he had hurt Vida and how he was now endangering her life. She took Vida by the hand and stormed out of the house with one suitcase of her belongings. They were on a flight back to Seattle a few days later.

A man making the same confrontation might well have been killed. What my friend learned only later is that, while women in the more traditional parts of the Middle East are generally powerless, part of the “shame and honor” code means they cannot be publicly mistreated. “Shame and honor” dynamics are part of the unspoken but essential context for this parable.

Luke’s Jesus opens with “a certain judge was in a certain city who did not fear God.” And then all of the Arabic translations of this story going back more than a thousand years go on to say of this judge: “he is not ashamed before people.” Here, then, is a judge who has no inner sense of what constitutes a good act and what makes an act shameful.

Without this context, we too easily assume that Jesus is saying that God is like this judge. But that framing seems to confirm an experience of God and of prayer that I find problematic. If we pray to a God who *is* like this shameless and unjust politician, we can conclude that God will eventually answer our prayers for healing, for justice or for guidance *only if we wear God down*.

That conclusion leaves us praying and watching for the outcome that we have envisioned. We tell ourselves and each other that the hold-up in God’s answer is our own laziness or lack of conviction. I don’t think that’s what Jesus meant about not losing heart. Perseverance in prayer is good, but that’s not the same thing as pestering God until our requests are granted just to stop our nagging. That’s not what Jesus meant about God quickly granting justice.

*God is not like the shameless judge.* But when we are attached to the outcomes of prayer, we might experience God that way.

Prayer is truly one of the great mysteries of faith. And when our prayers appear to go unanswered, it can confuse us. When God appears to go silent, it can hurt. When some helpful soul tries to reassure us by saying, “God’s answer was ‘no’,” it can feel a little simplistic. But these are genuine experiences, aren’t they?

So maybe, *maybe* this parable is less about God and more about our experiences of God. Maybe this parable is about us.

There’s an intriguing clue in the last line of our reading: “...when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” *Faith*. Not persistence, though that’s a part of spiritual practice. *Faith*. Faith, as I’ve been saying, is the standpoint of a

person who trusts and who hopes, but who abandons outcomes to God. Perseverance in our prayer does take care of the first part—to trust and hope in God. And maintaining a persistent prayer life can be difficult. But abandoning the outcomes into God’s loving wisdom is perhaps the harder part.

We can become so attached to our own chosen outcome that we miss God’s movement in the world, *and* in our own hearts and minds. The judge in the parable finally relented and granted the widow the justice he should have granted with her very first request. But for me to say that he “should have” points to my own desire, doesn’t it?

That’s the outcome that I want from the judge and I can taste my own judgment in it.

Vida’s ex-husband finally gave in and let her leave the country, but he should have given her the freedom to make her own decisions from the start. But there’s the outcome that I chose again. For me to say that he “should have” describes what I think is the best outcome, and there is still more than a little judgment in my heart.

And that judgment in my heart stimulates a little shame. If you are at all like me, you may be carrying around a little something in your heart that you are not proud of. Hiding from it is not fruitful. Offering it in prayer is, because God *will* answer. Theologian James Fowler, wrote this: “Grace, the grace of God and the grace mediated through the love and acceptance of humans—is the antidote to and the healing power for shame.”

“To be faithful,” Fowler wrote, “...means to maintain a certain sensitivity, a responsiveness, a suppleness of spirit in relation to the self and others. Faithfulness involves attending to the Other or to others, while also attending to ourselves...It is about living in relation to self and others with regard and reverence for their (and our) value and worth.”

If an apparently heartless politician finally caved in to the relentless pleas of a widow whose only power was to make him worry about his reputation, how much more will God grant *God’s* justice in *God’s* time and as *God* sees best? If I hope to see God’s work in the heart of another, I need to cultivate a suppleness of spirit that relaxes my grip on my preferences without abandoning my own values.

When the Son of Man comes,” Jesus asks, “will he find faith on earth?”

Perhaps, by fostering a faithful sensitivity, we might see God beginning to write God’s law into the heart of a shameless judge who at least *acts* as though he is feeling shame for the first time. Perhaps, by tending to a more faithful regard for myself and others, I might see God’s movement in the heart of a man putting his pride aside just long enough to let an ex-wife pursue a better life somewhere else.

Perhaps, by developing a deeply faithful openness and responsiveness to God, we can start to recognize that God only *appears* to be slow in responding. And that, in reality, God may be acting swiftly in ways that we can’t yet see clearly; responding to prayer more completely than we can fully fathom.

This much I know: Prayer pacifies fear, changing us perhaps more than anything else. So if it feels like the gloom is gathering, remind yourself that God is at work in human history, even now, in ways that are far more marvelous than we can know.

In just a few short weeks, on the Feast of Christ the King, we will hear Luke’s Jesus speaking from the cross. But even as we approach that crucial day, we trust that in raising the crucified Christ, God created an outcome that *still* outshines anything our minds and hearts can imagine.

Pray, then, always and do not lose heart.

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