

Persistence in Pursuit of Justice: A feminist interpretation of Luke 18 :1-8 for the UN World Day of Social Justice.

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In 2007, the UN General Assembly declared that 20 February will be celebrated annually as the World Day of Social Justice, recognising the need to promote efforts to tackle issues such as poverty, exclusion and unemployment. Today, more than ever, the cries for justice can be heard throughout our global community, whether it is from the millions of displaced women, men and children who are fleeing situations of war, famine or a life of poverty or from our planet Earth where we are witnessing unprecedented climate change.

The pursuit of Justice for us Christians is about the pursuit of love. God's love is gratuitous which is why we are being continuously asked to love gratuitously. The work of justice is a lifelong activity for us in the Mercy world. As Catherine herself said: "If we love God, we will undoubtedly love our neighbour also; they are as cause and effect".¹

When I was asked to write something to mark UN World Day of Social Justice what kept coming into my mind was *the challenge to persist* in work for justice which in these times is not easy. This brought to my consciousness a biblical story with which I was familiar, namely, that of the parable of the persistent widow in Luke.

I have been intrigued with how the point of this parable is often missed, or rather it is interpreted in a way that keeps us from seeing what is really there. The danger with parables is that they can be perceived as stories, as something that is not real or did not happen. Parables do not give clear answers but leave it up to the hearer to determine the outcome. There is always a significant twist in a parable. The listeners are drawn into the story, which leads them in a certain direction. Then, quite suddenly, things change. The ground is taken from under their feet, and they are walked into a cul de sac, which allows no escape. They are induced into an area that they would not have sought out. Parables can be seen as "subversive

¹ Catherine McAuley Retreat Instructions <http://www.mercyprayers.org/styled-187/styled-188/index.html> (accessed on 25th January, 2019).

speech”.² In reflecting on the UN Day for Social Justice, I want to explore this twist by highlighting how this parable is firstly about a woman’s persistent pursuit for justice and how this text gives us a female image for God. Finally, I will ~~look~~ focus on the implications of this approach for ministry.

A brief overview of the parable in its context:

Luke is noted for his preoccupation with prayer, both in this Gospel and in Acts. While there is not a consensus on the meaning behind this parable, this text is often used to illustrate the efficacy of prayer. For example, the Catholic Study Bible states the following:

“If an unjust judge with no moral conscience can be badgered into hearing the widow, how much more quickly will God respond to the pleas of the suffering lowly one? After all, God is not withdrawn, waiting for humans to come begging, but is actively seeking those who are lost”³.

As this parable is unique to Luke, we cannot compare it to other texts. One of the things that influences this interpretation is the fact that the preceding passage focuses on the eschatological discourse (17:20-18:14). Barbara Reid, a feminist biblical scholar, has a different interpretation. She concludes:

“Although we have no other version of the parable to which to trace Luke’s redactional changes it is clear that v.1 and vv 6-8 are secondary additions that reflect early Christian attempts to understand a startling story. Most scholars agree that the original parable of Jesus is found in vv 2-5”.⁴

The title also varies for this text depending on what translation of the bible one is using. It can be seen as the “persistent widow” or the “the parable of the widow and the unjust judge”. A point to keep in the mind is there are no headings on any of the manuscripts that have been found. Titles given to scripture texts can be misleading. For the most part, I recommend ignoring the title and going directly to grapple with the text itself. With this in mind, and concurring with some feminist scholars, I too believe that this parable is both about the granting of justice and embracing a female image of God.

A critical approach to the narrative.

² William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox 1994) 9.

³ Donald Senior and Pheme Perkins, “The Gospels and Acts” in *The Catholic Study Bible*, (ed. Donald Senior and John J. Collins, Oxford, 2006) 397-438, here 408.

⁴ Barbara Reid, “A Godly Widow Persistently Pursuing Justice: Luke 18:1-8”, *Biblical Research* (2000), 25-33, here 27.

One of the principles in the hermeneutics of liberation, of which feminist interpretation is a part, is an attitude and practice of suspicion.

“Hermeneutics of suspicion subverts long-standing traditional interpretations that have tended to portray women as occupying a secondary or subservient role. It questions the underlying presuppositions, androcentric models, and articulated interests of contemporary biblical interpretation”.⁵

This is the approach I take for reflecting on this text. The redactor of Luke’s gospel was writing from a predominantly patriarchal and imperialist social reality. “Bringing this critical lens to the text, we are able to explore precisely how women have themselves read into the texts, and came to recognize the urgent need for women’s own parables, women’s own narratives”.⁶

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus^[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’”^[b] ⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

The narrative gives us two main characters, namely the judge and the widow. The characterization of both is developed but we know little of either. The plot involves conflict resolution among other matters. The widow is seeking justice. Obviously, something happened but we do not have the explicit details as to who they are or what the issue is, except that it is one of justice. I propose looking at the text more closely and analysing the material we have.

⁵ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984) 16.

⁶ Jane Schaberg, “Luke” in *Women’s Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 363 – 380, here 370.

The unjust judge

In a city there is a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people v.2. As in all parts of the world judges have power. “In this society which was highly stratified, status-conscious social system of the first century world, elites had a rightful place”.⁷ This judge is self-serving and obviously corrupt. The administration of justice is only effective if judges are seen to be doing a good job. That is not the case in this text. Each city would have had a judge or judges who would settle disputes between citizens. There are many references in the first testament about judges, for example, in Exodus 18:21-22 which states:

“You should look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain....let them sit as judges for the people at all times. God proclaimed the need for judges and specified that their actions must be right and righteous, with just judgment, with respect of persons and without bribes”. (Deut. 16:18-20, 25:1, 2 Chr. 19: 5-7).

Judges were forbidden to take bribes or pervert the course of justice. (Exod. 23:6-9, Lev 19:15, Isa. 1:17). So, while this is the ideal, people would have been aware of the corruption that existed and of the bribes that were given to judges, some very like what we have in the text. The widow in this text obviously has paid no bribes, but perhaps her adversary had influence or paid bribes. In honour societies, actions are more important than words.⁸ The people listening to the parable would have known this reality but may have been surprised at Jesus for describing what was actually going on. Just like today when we fail to name or acknowledge how judges can be bribed or misuse their position of power.

The courageous widow:

In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying “Grant me justice against my opponent” v.3. We are not given the details of her case. What we do know is that she is persistent as she continued to return to him and that she was seeking justice. Throughout the biblical text we have references to widows. At times they are depicted as defenceless and poor. Widows were vulnerable to harsh treatment (Deut. 22:22-3, Ps 94.6; Isa 1:23, Luke 20:47). Since they had no husband to defend them, there was nobody there to

⁷ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World, Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 107.

⁸ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 41.

insist that justice be administered. The outcome of their litigations was generally expected to go against them.

“In ancient Mediterranean culture, widows were not simply women whose husbands had died. They entered a different socio-economic status upon the death of their husbands. A widow is in a precarious situation in regard to her “shame” because she has no male to defend her and the honour of her children and household”.⁹

This widow defies the notion of a defenceless woman. She is present here as a strong and persistent woman. How many times she had to come before the judge we do not know. She was on her own. She would have had no status compared to the judge with whom she pleads. The woman’s public demand for justice in front of the judge could be seen as a shameless act. The fact of going to court would have aggravated the dishonour by publicising it.¹⁰ One wonders if it is her experience of the everyday reality that provokes her to seek justice. The desire to seek justice was so deep inside her that she was prepared to go for it alone. This would have been unusual, but so real, as even today many women start out on the road to seek justice alone. Obviously, no one was prepared to help her. She has found her voice and she uses it repeatedly to berate the judge in pursuing justice. She becomes an agent of change. No one is doing it for her. She discovers a deeper claim to recognition, her equality as a human being. She is the protagonist just like some other widows in the biblical tradition; Tamar, Judith, or Ruth, who from their own experiences found ways to intervene and act which leads to salvation for their people. This, then, is not an isolated story of a strong woman in the biblical tradition. Luke refers to widows more frequently than other Gospels (2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12; 18;3,5; 20:47; 21:2-3), often in passages that presuppose their economic helplessness in a male-dominated society.¹¹ But then again, we look at Anna who is a widow but she is also a prophetess, whom we are told spend eighty-four years prophesying in the temple. Just like Anna’s persistent role as prophetess in the temple, the widow is persistent in her pursuit of justice.

⁹ Bruce J. Malina & Jerome H. Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (ed. Jerome H. Neyrey, Massachusetts: Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 63.

¹⁰ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 45

¹¹ Jane Schaberg, *Luke*, 367.

The interesting thing is that people would have seen her come and go to the court as the text tells us that she kept returning to the judge v. 3. Those in the court would have heard her. Yet she was on her own. This is often the case for those who pursue justice. While many may agree with an issue, very often onlookers do not see the issue as part of their problem. Therefore, the text is all the more impacting as this woman had an ability to keep on persisting even if it meant going along the road alone.

So how is her behaviour viewed in the context? I am sure many thought she should keep silent. After all she was challenging the judicial power system by demanding justice. The judge had not taken her request seriously otherwise he would have granted her justice immediately. Yet, perhaps because she did not keep silent, she was able to expose an unjust system while others had not the courage to do so. Institutions which stand for justice are often unjust. The widow's persistence highlights the need to see institutions that promote justice rather than treating the institutions themselves as manifestations of justice.

Persistence for justice always will bring truth to the forefront. It may take time and a lot of persistence, but the more people protest and keep on protesting eventually others begin to listen. Bruce Malina, in his book on the cultural anthropology of the New Testament, looks at the concepts of honour and shame as values in the first-century Mediterranean World. He talks about people being out of place in a negative way as deviants but those that are out of place in a positive way are referred to as prominent people. He states: "While they are abnormal, they are not unclean, impure, or polluted. Rather they are super-clean or super-pure, so to say".¹² I would like to make the claim that this woman could have been seen in a much more positive light than we might have first imagined. The text does not tell us. The only thing we know from the text is that she was eventually granted justice.

The judgment:

¹² Malina, *The New Testament World*, 29.

Why does the judge finally make a judgment in her favour? Is the judge afraid the woman might give him a black eye or strike him? v.5: The verb is ὑπωπιάζω in Greek and means to give a black eye or strike in the face, or to bring someone to submission by constant annoyance or to put under strict discipline, treat roughly or torment.¹³ This word only appears in the New Testament in one other text 1 Cor 9:27 where Paul is defending his role as an apostle. Paul sees himself as a boxer imposing self-discipline. This is a strong word and one wonders why this is the term used. It is translated differently depending on what text one consults. For example, in NAB, it is translated as “lest she finally come and strikes me”, while in the NRSV as “that she may not wear me out”. This seems to lack punch! We find it difficult to deal with strong language when it is used in a biblical context. Yet resistance to injustice typically draws on both indignation and argument. Frustration and anger can help motivate us by generating a passion which moves us to action. But there is a need for reason but reason need not be undermined by the indignation that leads us to an investigation of the ideas underlying the nature and basis of persistent inequities. This widow was making an appeal in public which is an important feature of the approach to justice. As Barbara Reid observes, this may be the intentional twist of the story.¹⁴ The demands of justice are not a solitary exercise. It could be that in her frustration of not being heard and being alone that she finally had to use such violent language in order to produce the results. Ivoni Richter alludes to the manner in which these lines are commented on by exegetes. She points out how the woman is seen to break social norms if she were behaving in an aggressive or violent way. But if a woman is being mistreated, then it is dealt with in a completely different manner.¹⁵

This often happens when people set out on a course of justice by peaceful means - they can often end up using violence as a means of being heard. I am not trying to advocate violence. Unjust structures were a part of the society in which Jesus lived. I have no doubt he was well aware of the challenge he was presenting to those who were hearing this parable. On the other hand, perhaps this judge was afraid that the whole place would rise up against him. After all we know this case was on-going for some time. All we can do is speculate as to

¹³ BDAG., ὑπωπιάζω., 1043

¹⁴ Barbara Reid, “A Godly Widow Persistently Pursuing Justice”, 29.

¹⁵ Richter, *El poder de una protagonista*, 3.

why the word ὑπωπιάζω was used. What we can conclude is that the pursuit of justice is what the widow wanted and persisted until she received it. Also, the appeal to reason in public is an important feature of justice.

In the practice of law, it is frequently asserted that justice should not only be done, but also be “seen to be done”. So, while in this case justice was seen to be done, it was-for all the wrong reasons. The judge does not repent for his actions and stated he had no fear of God and no respect for anyone v.4. It is only the woman’s insistence that advances the cause of justice. This can often be the case why unjust structures do not change. Just as in this case the widow has been granted justice but the system has not change. Only God knows what will happen to the judge, but if we do not keep insisting on justice it will never be realized.

God as the Judge?

So, the parable is open-ended but Luke then goes on to query whether God will not grant justice to his chosen ones who cry out to God day and night? This can be seen as an early interpretation of the text but ~~this~~ it presents some issues around the image of God and on prayer. Most commentaries tend to see God as the judge but this poses questions. The judge in this text is corrupt and it states twice that he has no fear of God nor had he respect for people v.2 and 4. He only grants justice in the end out of fear, not because he believes it is the correct thing to do, to administer justice. Therefore, his behaviour has not changed and we can presume he will continue in his corrupt and dishonest ways. How can this judge be an image for God? Some interpreters see the parable in terms of assurance. If the judge will grant justice to the persistent widow how much more will God give to those who are upright? Therefore, how can we possibly equate this person as an image of God in the text? A God who is a God of love, who promotes justice, who responds rapidly to those who call out and pray constantly is part of the eschatological discourse which we see presented in the text that comes immediately before this parable 17:22-37. We are constantly being told that God’s love is freely given: “for everyone who asks will receive” and “the one who seeks will find”, and “the door will be opened to the one who knocks”. Luke: 11:10.

Given that it is the widow who seeks justice and is persistent until she finds it, sounds more like the image of God that we know from all of the biblical texts. This woman is like the women in the parables of the yeast 13: 20-21 and the lost coin 15:8-10 all of whom can be

seen to represent God. This is an unexpected twist in the parable.¹⁶ Not only do we have a feminine image of God being presented, but one which is also challenging unjust structures. This can be difficult for many people to accept. It can be less challenging to stay with the parable as a text for persistent prayer, where by one must plead and beg for God to act, because in that way one does not have to assume responsibility to change unjust situations. We can just sit back and wait until God acts. This text challenges us as it challenged those hearing the parable by showing that injustice is hard to eradicate in human society. This woman embodies an image of God that takes the side of those who are poor and oppressed, a God that is inserted in a reality of life where justice is needed.

The persistent search for justice:

The widow's persistent search for justice is repeated by many women throughout the world today. For example, Máxima Acuña from Cajamarca in Perú who continues to stand up ~~stood up~~ for her right to peacefully live off her own property, a plot of land sought by Newmont Mining Company or Nonhle Mbuthuma, from South Africa, who is leading the fight for her community against a mining company which wants to mine titanium on their ancestral land or Nadia Murad Basee Taha, Iraqi Yazidi, who in 2018 was awarded the Nobel peace prize for her efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict, to name but a few. Not to mention the countless women around our world who do not make international headlines ~~to~~ but persist in the pursuit of justice in their daily lives.

Conclusion:

The scriptures are full of traditions that, particularly when illuminated by the awareness of the experience of suffering, indignity, and inhumanity, can help the pursuit of criticism and action which may contribute to a theology that takes seriously those on the margins. Women around the world are reading the bible from their context and therefore belong to the social and civic forces seeking to protect and nurture life, to guard and promote the dignity of the human person; as well as caring for our fragile planet earth. The interpretation given above of parable of the persistent and courageous widow defies the image of a weak widow or the

¹⁶ Barbara Reid, *Choosing The Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Minnesota: Collegville: The Liturgical Press, 1996) 192.

idea of persistent prayer as outlined by a number of scholars. This interpretation opens up the whole other idea of who God is. The image of God as a woman who exposes an unjust system through her persistence can motivate and sustain many of us in Mercy who are trying to do just that.

The work of justice is a continuous task which women and men in our Mercy world, hearing the word of God present in history, like the courageous widow, create moments of hope where justice can be seen to be done.

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