

“The Widow and the Judge”

Date: August 25, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Deuteronomy 24:19-22; 27:19; Luke 18:1-8

Occasion: Short Stories by Jesus, series **Theme:** Stereotypes

Today is the conclusion of our sermon series, looking at the parables of Jesus through the eyes of a Jewish rabbi, Rabbi Amy-Jill Levine. Once again, she does not disappoint us in giving us a *totally* different understanding of this parable than many of us have come to understand.

She begins with the premise that parables are meant to challenge us, they are meant to unsettle us and cause us to re-think what we believe. She believes this parable has been edited by the author, Luke, who domesticated it and tamed it, by making it a parable about prayer.

There has long been a debate among biblical scholars as to how much of this parable is actually original with Jesus, and how much has been edited by Luke when he compiled all of his materials to write this book. Religiously conservative scholars see all eight verses as being original with Jesus. Those on the more liberal side are more willing to see Luke doing some editing, while preserving the core of the parable.

For the sake of her interpretation, Rabbi Levine sides with the liberals and begins her interpretation with verse three where the widow is introduced. And from the beginning she asks us to question our assumptions.

And our first assumption, when we meet the widow, is that widows are in special need of God’s care. Vulnerable, in need of support and protection, they are generally figures to be aided rather than emulated. They are not themselves role models; those who care for them are.

There is some biblical support for this point of view. Deuteronomy 24, which we read earlier, says that God has a special preference for the *widow, the orphan and the stranger*. Deuteronomy 27 says that anyone who deprives the *alien, the orphan or the widow* of justice shall be cursed.

Rabbi Levine says we should not dismiss the very real concern of poor widows, but we should question the stereotype. Not all widows are poor. Not all widows are helpless, damsels-in-distress who need to be rescued. As well, there *were* social safeguards set up within Jewish society to protect and assist the widows who needed help.

Some widows, no doubt, were destitute, but to conclude that *all* widows were abused is to overstate the case, and it sets us up to predetermine who is the righteous one and who is the evil one in this parable. The parable gives us no indication of her economic status. She may be poor, but she does have access to the court and she does not invoke *poverty* as the reason for her appeal.

We hear the word *widow*, and we think we know this character already. The widow might well be destitute, oppressed and desperate. She may also be wealthy, powerful and vengeful. Or she may be something in between. Once we stereotype her, we can ignore the challenge of the parable, and so ignore the challenge to our stereotypes.

Next we meet the judge, the second character in the parable. In the verses which all scholars agree is the core of the parable, the judge is not the epitome of righteousness, nor is he clearly corrupt. In the prologue to the parable, *Luke* labels him as unjust. In any case, the parable seems to make the argument from the lesser to the greater. If an unrighteous judge will grant justice, surely the Righteous God in heaven will do the same.

Whether the judge in the parable is unjust, as Luke seems to imply, is an open question. In fact, we do not know if the widow herself is righteous or not. Is the judge, in fact unjust by denying the widow her cause or by granting her what she wants? What do we really know about the judge?

Well, the parable proper tells us that the judge *does not fear God*. That is not the same thing as being unjust. It is unwise, given that Proverbs 1:7 clearly says “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” It could signal a lack of moral compass. However, not fearing God is not the same thing as being corrupt.

The judge’s lack of respect for other men could indicate that he refuses to bend to outside influence. He is beholden to no one. Maybe it means he is immune from being bribed. Maybe he doesn’t care what others think of him; he’s going to judge as he sees right, not as others want him to. His independence of what other’s think could be seen as a positive trait.

The parable tells us that for a while he refused her request, though she keeps coming back. In other words, she does not respect his verdict, because it is not the verdict that she wants. He does not respect her or care whether she respects him. He has made his decision.

But the widow is persistent. Many find this an admirable character trait. She’s a strong woman, who doesn’t give up no matter who her adversary is. In the NIV translation we use in worship the text tells us the judge says, “Because this widow keeps bothering me I will see that she gets justice, lest she wear me out.”

Rabbi Levine says a better translation from the Greek would be instead of “bothering me,” it means “she causes me work.” Secondly, the NIV says, “lest she wear me out.” And Rabbi Levine says a better translation would be “beat me up,” or “give me a black eye.” There is a hint

of a threat, even of some type of violence. For the purpose of our parable, the threat seems to cause the judge to act. He will give her what she wants, either to simply get rid of her, or to avoid the threat. But his decision is not based on the merit of her case. This is not justice; it is intimidation.

And finally, Rabbi Levine tells us that where the NIV translates “I will grant her justice,” in the Greek it literally means, “I will avenge her.” In other words, the widow gets what she wants, which is vengeance. The judge, whether you find him a likable character or not, is co-opted and made an accessory to the widow’s scheme to enact vengeance on her adversary.

The judge is motivated less by justice and more because of the fact that he is tired and feels threatened. The story ends with the judge’s decision and thus the parable ends as a story about corruption, violence and vengeance. Justice is not clearly rendered. I wonder what the widow’s opponent in this case thinks. I wonder what you think, now.

If we accept the premise that Luke has edited the original story told by Jesus, then this parable is not really about prayer. Luke has simply added a tag line onto the story, because he can’t accept the messiness of the parable. He likes things to be neat and tidy.

I don’t know about you, but I have often been uncomfortable thinking that in order to get God to answer our prayers, we have to constantly beat on his door until God gets tired of listening to us and finally grants us our request. I like that Rabbi Levine sets this parable free from the burden of believing we have to wear God out in order to get prayers answered.

So then, what *does* this parable mean? My take-away, after having read Rabbi Levine’s chapter, is that we shouldn’t always make assumptions about people, assuming that as soon as we are introduced to them we can neatly put them into boxes and know all about them.

This parable causes us to question our stereotypes about people. Maybe widows aren't always helpless, little old ladies. Sometimes they can be mean, vengeful and conniving. Judges aren't always corrupt. They can also be overworked, tired and may not always make the best decisions, or they may make decisions for the wrong reasons. Question stereotypes!

This past week I ran across a post on Facebook that warmed my heart, because it was a story about two men who worked past the easy stereotypes of each other, and found a common bond. Let me tell it to you:

Last Friday night I was standing outside of a barbershop in Cincinnati, Ohio, with a small group of mostly black men, when this officer walked over to a group of us. He looked around curiously and said "I don't see a car blocking an intersection" while shaking his head.

I asked him what he was talking about. He said someone called and reported that we had a car blocking the intersection. He paused for a minute and shook his head again. In that moment we both nodded and acknowledged what had just happened. Someone basically saw our group and made a false report.

I asked him how long he had been on the job and he said 10 months. He asked what we were doing at the barbershop and so I told him about the barbershop challenge *Men of Courage* and *Ford Fund* has sponsored. I asked if he wanted to come inside. He said he wanted to, but didn't want to spoil the fun with his presence. Again we both nodded and acknowledged the reality of distrust between the community and police officers.

I offered to take him inside so he could meet the owners and establish a relationship. I told him that someone has to take the first step to healing these relationships. He said he wanted to, but was unsure of what the reaction would be.

I told him it would be cool and that Jerome Bettis and a host of other amazing people were inside. He lit up like a lightbulb and said “No way The Bus is in there”, with a kid-like smile. I said “Hold on, I’ll grab him and have him come out.

Jerome Bettis came out and the officer stood there with his mouth wide open, before saying “If my dad was still alive he would be so excited, because you were his favorite player”. We all stopped and sat in the moment before they went on to take a selfie together.

It was one of those moments that reminded me of our humanness, our frailties and our similarities. In that moment we were all just men navigating the world without the mask we are taught and trained to wear.

I could have taken offense to the call out on the officer and accused him of being a racist cop. He could have believed the caller and acted based on stereotypes about black men in groups.

But we chose to just see each other and talk like humans. It’s ultimately a decision we can all make. When he lit up like a kid at seeing his dad’s sports hero, I saw a little boy and the uniform no longer mattered.

Friends, I believe Rabbi Levine has done us a favor in pointing us in a new direction in understanding this parable. We can collectively choose to see beyond the uniforms we all wear. It’s not easy and there is a lot of work to be done, but if we can at least start seeing each other, I believe things will get better. How about you? Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publishing, NY, NY, 2014, “The Widow and the Judge,” pp. 239-265.