

“Trying To Process a Difficult Text”

Luke 18:1–8

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Certain passages of scripture are difficult to process in some places of life. Today’s reading from Luke is one of these. Jesus tells a parable about an unjust judge who is almost comical. He neither fears God nor respects people. So, when a widow comes to him, seeking justice against her accuser, the judge, probably her only recourse, refuses to help. Only because she wears him out with her persistence does he grant justice. OK, OK, he says, if you will just shut up, I will help! If this lousy excuse for a judge helps the widow, Jesus says, surely God will not delay in helping God’s chosen ones who cry out repeatedly for help. God will quickly grant justice to them.

God will quickly grant justice... God hears the cries of God’s people... Our prayers are answered... Really? I have known many wonderful people of faith who prayed fervently to get well from a terminal illness who only suffered and died. There are many faithful Ukrainians who have prayed for over three and a half years for an end to the latest unjust war in their land, but there is still no peace. Many faithful Israelis and Palestinians have prayed for an end to the tragic hostilities in their homeland, and there is now a ceasefire, but who knows how long it will last, and even if it is a long time, it was a long time coming. Racial justice has certainly been delayed, repeatedly.

“Teach me the patience of *unanswered* prayer,” our hymn of discipleship says, connecting deeply with our experience. Some people will say all prayer is answered, just not always in the way we want, and there is truth in this claim, but we normally seek a specific answer which quite often we do not receive.

Of course, sometimes we ask for frivolous things, the denial of which does not mean God is callous. The former editor of *The Christian Century*, John M. Buchanan, said that he had two loving parents who did not always give him what he wanted. One year for

Christmas, he asked for a horse, a dog, and a two-wheeled bicycle he wasn't old enough to ride. The fact that his parents didn't give him all this didn't mean they didn't love him.

However, there are times when we ask for far less frivolous things and do not receive them, for no good reason we can imagine. In such cases, what do we make of Jesus' parable? It doesn't seem to be true. The reading from 2 Timothy says that all scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching. What exactly does this text teach us? Among other things, it underscores the need for interpretation. All scripture needs interpretation, and as our own beloved Elmo Scoggin used to say, every translation is an interpretation anyway. What might this difficult-to-hear text tell us if we are willing to work to discern its meaning?

We need to begin with the first part of our reading where Luke says, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." This comes on the heels of Jesus' prediction of dire times, which the early church certainly experiences. So, Jesus is telling this story with a very specific purpose – to offer encouragement in such times. It is a calling to perseverance, especially in prayer, no matter what. Just keep doing it, the parable says, be persistent like the widow, even if it seems like we are becoming obnoxious, because there is value in our persistence, even if we do not get what we want.

There is a Hassidic tale about a tailor who asks his rabbi if he should really pray every day (*Who Needs God*, Harold Kushner, p. 153). Doesn't God grow weary of hearing us whine about the same things over and over again and offer the same words of praise? God already knows our needs and does not require praise. Yes, the rabbi says, it becomes wearisome, God doesn't need to hear the same requests and the same words of praise over and over again, but we need to offer all this, so God allows us to express it. There is value for us in persistence.

Frederich Buchner put it this way in his book *Wishful Thinking* (pp. 70-71). He said that according to Jesus, the most important thing about prayer is to keep at it. His images are all rather comic like of our unjust judge or of a friend you go to at midnight to borrow bread from – just keep asking, like a man who asks Jesus to heal his epileptic son.

“What about when the boy is not healed,” Buechner asks, “when listened to or not listened to, the prayer goes unanswered? ‘Who knows?’ Jesus says, just keep praying. Remember the sleepy friend, the crooked judge. Even if the boy dies, keep on beating the path to God’s door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if (God) does not bring you the answer you want, (God) will bring you (Godself). And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for.”

Indeed. Sometimes our prayers are answered in the ways we want them to be — we experience healing, we feel comfort, our faith is reborn, we find purpose. Sometimes they are not. But we always create the possibility of meeting God or realizing that God has been with us all along, and that is what we need most. The text of our hymn of praise puts it this way. “Hast thou not seen, how thy desires e’er have been granted in what he ordaineth?” God grants what we need most.

And yet, this parable offers something more than a calling to perseverance in prayer. It also provides an assurance of justice. God will grant justice, Jesus says, quickly he says, though perhaps in God’s time, quickly. I have recently referenced Bono’s update of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s quote of Theodore Parker. The old quote is, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Bono says it doesn’t bend, we have to bend it, but the bending is toward justice. God is moving this world toward justice.

It is a critical word of assurance both in our personal lives and for the world around us. On a personal level, it means God is always working for good, for the best, for what right and just for us, no matter how long it takes. Life is not intrinsically evil. It may seem random or arbitrary at times, but as my theology professor Frank Tupper put it in his book *A Scandalous Providence*, God is not.

Frank wrote this book partly out of a lifetime of theological study of providence and partly out of his experience with loss. His beloved wife died when their children were young. I had him for a class right after this loss, and it was devastating. In the book, Frank writes about an

experience he had not long after Betty died when a former student called and told him about another student, a classmate of his with a young child, who was dying. He said he thought it might help if Frank could call him (pp. 79-80).

At first, Frank told the man he couldn't call the former student, he was too close to his own loss, but a few days later he changed his mind. He called the man, David, and after a brief exchange of greetings and an awkward silence created by the years and miles between them, David talked while Frank listened, details of the illness. "Cancer. Therapy. Medication. All intruders. Now one hardly different from the other."

Then, after a long pause, softly and deliberately, almost whispering so that no one else could hear, David said, "Is God arbitrary?" It was a question for a theology professor, to be sure, but a weighty one, given Frank's grief. Was God arbitrary? Was God consistent? "Am I dying because God simply refuses through medicine or miracle to heal me? Am I leaving my wife and baby son because God thinks they really do not need me? Am I sick to death because God has some judgment against me for some wrong long forgotten in the forgiveness of grace? Am I dying because God does not love me enough to make me well?"

"No, David, God is not arbitrary," Frank said, "God always does the most God can do." "No... that's what I thought," said David.

A few days later, they talked again, about life's gifts — wife, son, friends. They talked about death and eternal life. Frank searched for metaphors, all necessary, all inadequate — brilliant Light, open Door, warming Presence. Occasionally David asked a question, but he already had asked the most important one, about God. He died a short time later, Frank says, believing: Life is arbitrary. God is not. Grace.

God is not arbitrary. God is loving and just. God always does the most God can do, given the realities of this life and the gift of free will. But according to Jesus' parable, God will grant justice for our lives, even if it is on God's schedule and not ours.

But this parable also assures us that God will grant justice for the world. All things are not yet fully subject to God's reign. Not everything that happens is the result of God's will. Anyone who wants to suggest it is will have to explain the Holocaust in Nazi Germany that

took seven million lives, numerous other acts of genocide, and the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 that took a quarter of a million lives. But as arbitrary as this world can be, and as downright unjust as people often are, God is still at work for justice for the poor and vulnerable, for the oppressed and persecuted, for the immigrant and refugee. And though other forces may prevail for a time, God's justice will not be denied.

Yet how does God bring about justice? Most often not through some miraculous intervention from the heavens but through human instruments like us. It's like the old joke about a man on a deserted island praying to God for deliverance who turned away first a boat, then a plane, and finally a helicopter, each time saying, "Thanks anyway, but God is going to rescue me." When God never showed up in person, the man complained to the heavens whereupon God said, "Look, I sent you a boat, a plane, and helicopter, and you turned away all three!" It's fine for us to pray for justice, but only if we are willing to put feet on our prayers. After Jesus says God will quickly grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry out, he adds, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Justice depends upon our faithful action.

So, in addition to praying for the poor, we have a clothing ministry and a food truck, Toy Joy and White Flag, Rise Against Hunger and Habitat for Humanity, but are we willing to fight for policies that place a priority on helping the poor? In addition to praying for immigrants — nearly four million of whom are waiting on our court system while we are deporting them, nearly a third of the refugees in the past year being Christians fleeing persecution — we welcome them into our clothing ministry, church, and lives, but are we willing to fight for more just immigration policies? These are political questions but asked in light of Jesus' words in Matthew 25 — I was hungry and you gave me food, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing. God will grant justice, but will Jesus find us faithful?

So, after considering this text more carefully, we still find it difficult to process but for a different reason. It's not a matter of whether God is loving and just but a question of whether we understand our role in God's realm. We are called to keep praying and get to work!