

Luther Seminary Chapel
9/26/01
Luke 18:1-8
Ps. 30:8

The sermon text for this morning is the Gospel reading, along with Psalm 30:8 –
“Then you hid your face, and I was filled with fear.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the novel, *Men and Angels*, by Mary Gordon, there are two Christians. One of them is a young woman, Laura, who is going to college and working as a nanny for a woman named Anne, and her children. At the end of the story, Anne comes home to find Laura, having bled to death in the family bathtub. She has killed herself, carving Anne’s name into her wrists, and leaving Anne a note in which she quotes from Isaiah: “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands.”

A few days later, Laura is buried and Anne has a conversation with the other Christian in the book, an older woman whose name is Jane. Here is a part of that conversation.

[Anne] walked into the living room. She was surprised to see Jane reading by a dim light. Jane raised her hand to Anne in greeting. There was something monumental in her gesture, in her posture, in her sitting in the semidarkness; and it made Anne angry. Something in the way Jane looked reminded her of the rage she felt, for Jane, too, worshipped what Laura in worshipping had died of.

Anne approached her directly; there were things she wanted Jane to hear.

“She looked to God for love,” Anne said. “And she got death. I thought that when you asked for bread you weren’t given stones.”

Jane was silent.

“I suppose it’s easier for you. You believe in God.”

“No, it’s much harder for me. As I believe in a loving God, it is much more difficult to understand.”

“How can you love a God that lets this happen?”

“I don’t. This is the God I fear. The dark cruel face I cannot understand that looks on while His children suffer” (p. 386).

“You hid your face,” the psalmist says, “and I was filled with fear.”

Jesus gives us another portrait of a fearsome figure. What if you had to look to a judge like the one in the parable for justice? The judge in the parable is not frightening because of what he might do. He is frightening because he does nothing! A widow comes to him for help, and over and over again, he refuses to help her. Why? Is there a bribe involved from the other side? We hear nothing of it if there is. Apparently, this judge refuses justice to the woman just because he can. He simply refuses. The widow is forced to pummel the judge with requests until he does the right thing simply to get rid of her.

Commentators on this parable assure the reader that Jesus does not mean for the judge to be analogous to God. You can guess the theological problems they are trying to avoid. No one wants to imagine that God would simply look on while a widow begs for justice, or while others of God’s children suffer. No one wants to reduce prayer to the act of pestering God until God cries, “Uncle!” and does what should have been done all along. Commentators say that the argument here is like the one Jesus makes in the gospel of Matthew, where he says, “Who among you, if your child asks for bread will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give the child a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father

in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (7:9-11). The judge, who neither fears God nor respects human beings, finally does the right thing, like evil parents who can manage to feed their children. The theology is in the *how much more*. How much more will God give good gifts to God’s children! How much more will God grant justice!

OK. But here’s the thing. If God’s granting of justice were not an open question, would Jesus have had to tell the parable? Would the church have to retell it? There is at least some evidence, in our own lives, which points to the conclusion that God is actually *less* like the unjust judge than we would like. At least in the case of the judge, persistence paid off! What about in God’s case? “Will God not grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?” Jesus asks. “Will he delay long in helping them?” These are good questions.

Annie Dillard tells a story about the church she attended while writing *Holy the Firm*.

“There is one church here, so I go to it. On Sunday mornings I quit the house and wander down the hill to the white frame church in the firs. On a big Sunday there might be twenty of us there; often I am the only person under sixty, and feel as though I’m on an archaeological tour of Soviet Russia. The members are of mixed denominations; the minister is a Congregationalist, and wears a white shirt. The man knows God. Once, in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world—for the gift of wisdom to its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving and pained, succor to the oppressed, and God’s grace to all—in the middle of this he stopped, and burst out, ‘Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week.’ After a shocked pause, he continued reading the prayer. Because of this, I like him very much” [Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), 57f.].

“Lord, we bring these same petitions every week!” “Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?”

Jesus answers his own questions by saying, “I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” God will not delay, Jesus says. God will grant justice speedily to those who cry out to him day and night.

That is Jesus’ answer. Jesus believes that about God. In the gospel, when Jesus says this, he is still outside Jerusalem. He is still at some distance from his own crying out to God at night (in Gethsemane) and by day (on the cross). Does he know yet how dangerously unjust life on this planet can get? If he does not, he is on his way to finding out.

When Jesus finds out about justice and injustice from teachers like Pilate and Herod and crowds of people like us who had been devoted to him days before his death and then started shouting, “Crucify him!” *still, even then*, Jesus lives the kind of trust he speaks at the end of this parable. Jesus keeps faith with the one from whom he expects vindication. He keeps faith, all the way to his death.

When he does this, Jesus gives us two paradoxical things. In the cross, Jesus gives us our clearest picture of the hidden God, of whom pictures abound. The God in whom Jesus trusted, the one who had been so loquacious at Jesus’ baptism, speaking from heaven and all that: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”—the God who is supposed to grant justice quickly to his chosen ones who cry out to him: that God is silent.

“How can you love a God that lets this happen?” Anne had asked Jane.

“I don’t” [Jane said]. “This is the God I fear. The dark cruel face I cannot understand that looks on while His children suffer.”

What a strange symbol to have at the center of our faith. A cross. A daily reminder of God's dawdling to grant justice to God's elect.

Unless justice is something different from what we expect. In the cross, Jesus gives us our clearest picture of the hidden God. But also in the cross—and this is the paradox—Jesus gives us our clearest picture of God's true self, and of God's way of bringing about justice. God, our sovereign God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the God who is greater than all—our God who could beat up our governor—does not, in the service of justice, reach for a bigger hammer. Our God, in the person of Jesus Christ, picks up a cross. Jesus lays down his life for friends and enemies alike, and when he does that, Jesus shows us that God's justice is inextricably bound up with God's own suffering love.

Reflecting on such love, the apostle Paul will say that it is all about justice. All that suffering love aims at making the ungodly just. It is for people like the unjust judge. It is for us. God's suffering love aims at making the ungodly just, not just in a fictitious way, but in fact, so that we do the work God has given us to do: judges grant justice to widows, and the rest of us follow suit.

Mary Hinkle