

## Parables Session 12

### Introductory Comments

1. The parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge is difficult. The parable proper is short (vv. 2-5) and without the explanation Luke provides (vv. 6-8) there is little indication of its intent. Many readers choose to accept Luke's contextualization, regard the parable as about prayer, and take one or both of its main characters as exemplars (whether positive or negative); the parable then becomes a tidy story comprehensible only through allegory.
2. Biblical widows are the most unconventional of conventional figures. Expected to be weak, they move mountains; expected to be poor, they prove savvy managers; expected to be exploited, they take advantage where they find it. So, we have Tamar (the Bible's first official "widow," Gen. 38:11); Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah; Abigail; the wise woman of Tekoa; the widow of Zarephath; Judith. All manifest agency, all defy the convention of the poor and dependent woman. The "importuning" widow in Luke 18 similarly shatters the stereotype, even as she epitomizes the strength, cleverness, and problematic motives of her predecessors.
3. Yet, Luke's feisty widow has been domesticated. The message she gives, at least according to the evangelist, is that of "the need to pray always and not to lose heart" (18:1). No independent woman who badgers a judge until she gets what she wants, she becomes one of those elect who "cry... day and night" (18:7). In Luke's concluding image she is more "a woman on her knees" than "a woman with a fist."
4. In the face of this domestication, and some of the assumptions we have regarding widows in Ancient Israel, we will take another look at this widow, remembering that parables are designed to shake up one's worldview, and to question the conventional. If a manager can be dishonest, a tax collector righteous, a landowner generous enough to provide a living wage to everyone in the marketplace, and a judge neither God-fearing nor respectful toward the people, surely a widow can be "vengeful." What she sees as justice may be something that we or her legal adversary would see as a perversion of justice. But for the parable to do its work, for it to challenge all our views rather than reinforce normative gender and class constructs, we need to go beneath the surface.

### Questions

*Read Luke 18:1-8, "The Widow and the Judge"*

1. **What does the parable say that the widow does to the judge?** The NRSV's mild suggestion that the widow will "wear out" the judge is one way the widow is tamed. The Greek uses a boxing term: the judge is concerned that the widow will give him a black eye. Whether we take this expression literally and see the woman as threatening violence or metaphorically and see the woman as suggestion humiliation or mortification will impact how we assess her character. As John Dominic Crossan once said, "I look at the widow and I don't consider her right or good. Maybe her adversary is right, but more polite."
2. **When you see that this parable involves a widow, what presuppositions does it evoke?** Some of the presuppositions or layers that we tend to lay on widows are: they are vulnerable, in need of support and protection, and generally figures to be aided rather than emulated. They are often seen as victims, pawns in a greater society and/or legal system that exploits them. We may even see in this widow a picture of an "enraged bag lady" or perhaps someone who was taken advantage of by her unnamed opponent. Some moderns may view them more

positively, as independent women with the freedom to express themselves uncontrolled by any man. These are common presuppositions – perhaps you came up with more. The question is – which of them ring true in this case?

- 3. Was there evidence that widows exerted power and agency in Ancient Israel?** We have already noted some famous cases of Old Testament widow-heroines. And in lived experience, while rabbinic law did prevent widows from inheriting in certain cases, a distinction is made between inheriting and bequeathing. Women could receive bequests of property, land, businesses, material goods, and so on. Women could also bequeath property, as the Mishnah indicates.

We also see from historical sources that Jewish widows were not necessarily rendered helpless nor cast into the street. The same holds for widows who were among the followers of Jesus. The Pastoral Letters seek to domesticate widows who, now independent of their husbands, had charge of their own finances (cf. 1 Timothy 5).

- 4. What is the economic status of the widow in the parable?** The parable gives no indication of the widow's economic status. She may be poor and perhaps lacks money to bribe the judge; on the other hand, she has access to the court, and she doesn't invoke poverty as a reason for her appeal. So, she could be destitute and desperate, or she could be wealthy and vengeful. Or perhaps somewhere in between. Once we stereotype her, we can ignore the challenge of the parable, and so ignore the challenge to our stereotypes.
- 5. How is the judge presented in the parable?** He is neither the epitome of righteousness, nor is he clearly corrupt. Luke simply calls him "unjust" and according to the parable he "neither feared God nor had respect for people" (18:2). The judge's interior monologue confirms this description (18:4). The judge, then, is exactly as described – what we see is what we get. And the nature of his "unjustness" is left an open question. In fact, just as we don't know whether or not the widow is righteous, so we do not know how to judge our judge. Is he unjust by denying the widow her cause or by granting her what she wants?
- 6. How does the parable challenge our stereotypes of both widows and judges?** The parable indicates that widows may be powerful and vengeful and exploit their positions; judges may be unjust (nothing new here), but their lack of justice may be prompted not by greed or even preferential option for one class or another, but by irascibility, self-protection, or simply not wanting to be inconvenienced. The parable prevents us from a positive assessment of either character. Neither judge nor widow is a moral exemplar; neither is even likeable. And yet, many of us struggle to find their good qualities; most readers, starting with Luke, want to rescue the widow. Here is a lesson about our own values. We resist the image of evil and seek good qualities. Or we resist ambiguity and force figures into opposites – good and bad, righteous and sinful, "us" and "them" – when we are all part of the same human community.
- 7. What do you think the point of this parable is?** There is no easy closure to the widow's story; in fact, there is no closure at all. We cannot root for the widow or the judge, and we don't have enough information to speak about the opponent, but if this person is tangled up with this widow, they may suffer guilt by association. Since we cannot find justice (*justice is never served*) in the setting, we have to look elsewhere. We also have to cross-examine ourselves. What are our stereotypes of widows and judges, of the legal system and its relationship to religious confession? Of human nature and the drive for vengeance? Why do we want one person or group to succeed and another to fail? Does the end ever justify the means (as it does in this story)?

Jesus was invested in fairness, reconciliation, and compassion. The parable of the widow and the judge defies any sort of fairness. The “justice” the “unjust judge” offers is not the justice of God or a program of fairness; it is granting a legal decision based not on merit, but on threat. There is no reconciliation in this parable; there is only revenge. There is no compassion, neither by the judge for the widow nor by the widow for the judge. This is the way the world functions, where structures and authorities impact lives devoid of justice, mercy, compassion, and reconciliation. With this story, Jesus forces us to find a moral compass – the ways of the world are laid bare before us. The ways of God are not the ways of the world. In which one will our hope for justice be placed?

*\*\*\*For the final Parable class, read Luke 16:19-31, “The Rich Man and Lazarus”*