

Luke 18:1-8

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

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

Here we are in the lectionary Gospel passage with another parable. Parables are these stories which provide us with wisdom, but often come with many layers and are open to interpretation. Reading it this week made me think of stories in my own life that continue to resonate, and one which I think applies in a similar fashion - especially as we consider our heartstrings here at UMC.

Several years ago, during our time in Southeastern PA, I was chatting with a friend about what shaped our faith. He recounted one story from his worklife, about a former boss who had learned about an employee who was unfaithful to his wife. He called the man into his office, and after confirming that the rumors were true, he fired him on the spot.

I'm sure my expression was not the reaction that the man had expected. "He fired him, just like that?" I asked. "Of course!" was the response I got. "He was a righteous man, who ran a business with a good reputation. He acted swiftly and justly, and did not tolerate anything else."

For this man, justice had far more to do with righteousness than mercy. In fact turning a blind eye to something immoral, or offering second chances, would have been perceived as lacking in righteousness.

It's been several years since that conversation. But I still think about it often because I think it exemplifies much of the political and theological divide we continue to experience in our society today.

Justice in our healthcare system may look on the one hand like the righteous argument that affordable care should be only for those who worked hard to earn the coverage of their healthcare plans, while those arguing for the merciful approach may want access for all regardless of who has earned it.

Justice for the poor or marginalized may argue that righteousness living will reward those most who work hard or who live a righteous life. Wealth and prosperity follow those who are most righteous. Some on this side of the argument may believe that the unrighteous are deserving of any marginalization or poverty they experience. A merciful perspective on the other hand may argue that there are systemic problems that need to be addressed otherwise they trap people in poverty and exclusion.

Justice along our national borders may look to some like a righteous legal immigration process, taller walls, and swift deportation for those who did not follow proper legal channels. The merciful approach might argue for citizenship for all who are longing for a place to call home.

Even in our churches we may have some who argue that belonging in faith spaces is for those who are righteously deserving. Those who live immorally must first clean up their act before they can belong. The more merciful approach might first start with inclusion for all, not requiring any standards for belonging.

The national reactions to yesterday's #NoKings demonstrations highlight this divide. Some saw this as a beacon of hope while others chastised participants for not respecting or valuing those in power - our elected officials. Merciful protest on the one hand, perhaps righteous structures on the other.

Of course the two-sidedness I've just outlined is more nuanced than how things actually play out. On any given matter, rather than standing in the righteous position, or the merciful one, we often try to blend the two together. Going back to the story of the boss with swift justice, most heads of a company probably evaluate each situation separately, evaluating what a process of reconciliation might look like and offering chances for redemption. Even those who lean toward righteousness may not act as swiftly or assuredly as the boss that my friend was so impressed by.

And of course even churches like ours, who offer a wide invitation for welcome and belonging also hold ourselves to standards for certain kinds of behavior. We might start each service saying we welcome each one here today, but perhaps we would have to re-think how encompassing our welcome was if someone regularly showed up publicly advocating for violence, white supremacy, homophobia, etc.

This morning's parable from Luke references a widow. She is vulnerable, marginalized, and without power in a patriarchal society. We don't know why she has been brought into the legal system, so it might be hard for us to figure out how justice might apply.

And that does tend to be our inclination when it comes to parables, doesn't it? We want to see some hard and fast examples, hoping that the parable will offer us a guide for whether to lean toward mercy or righteous. Jesus liked to tackle the issues of his day - poverty, inequality, religious elites, and more. And so we scan the text hoping to see something applicable for our time, hoping to find clarity at a moment where specific guidance is needed. Unfortunately not only do we not know what the widow's legal issues are, we also are not provided with an example of a good and moral judge.

Where we fall along the spectrum of righteousness or mercy is not an easy place to claim. It is often circumstantial, and difficult to define. And complicating things even further, our own individual heartstrings are probably slightly different than those sitting next to us here in the pews this morning, often tied to our personal experiences.

I had a personal experience with justice influenced by mercy or righteousness in 2021, when a Penn State student, late for class and not even wearing a helmet, ran a red light on their bike and plowed right into me as I passed through the same intersection on my bike. With frustration and adrenalin surging through my system, the only thing I wanted in the heat of the moment was an apology. A driver in a nearby vehicle rolled down their window to ask if I wanted someone to call the police. The merciful side of me dismissed this request. My bike looked fine, and though I was in pain, I figured it wasn't worth getting the police involved.

The student gave a quick apology and hopped on his bike to get to his class. I didn't even get his name. But as I tried to get back on my own bike, I realized that I couldn't lift my arm, nor could I put any weight on it. The handlebars and front tire of my bike were pretty badly mangled, and it dawned on me that things were a lot worse than I had originally imagined.

Over the next few months, as I navigated doctor visits and rehab, as well as bicycle repairs, I felt that pendulum of mercy and righteousness swing wildly. Friends asked why I hadn't got the cops involved - that kid should be paying my medical bills, they insisted, or at the very least, paying to repair my bike. Righteousness said it was only fair. My mercy in the moment faded as I wished for a more aggressive kind of justice. As I lamented my inability to be as healthy and active as I usually was, I longed for reparations and for things to be made right. I filed an official police report, but without a name or contact info, there wasn't much the police could do. I contacted CATA - hadn't there been a bus just down the street when the crash took place? But they could not help. This hopelessness at achieving real justice led to a deeper kind of frustration.

But after several weeks of stewing about what should have been, I realized that in my pain I thought I was desiring righteousness, but in fact I was longing for vengeance. I wanted someone to pay for what they had done, and in the process, perhaps feel some pain themselves.

And so we return to the widow and her plight with the mediocre judge. So intent on finding justice is the widow that she continues her persistence. It pays off, when finally the judge grants her the justice that she has been longing for.

Jesus contrasts the unjust judge with God, implying that if even a corrupt judge can be swayed by persistence, how much more will a righteous and merciful God respond to the cries of those in need.

The challenge and the comfort of this parable is to pray always, not to lose heart, and to trust in a God whose justice is far more righteous and merciful than anything we've experienced here on earth. It's this blending of the two that can be so hard for us to comprehend - especially when our society wants us to pick a side, and even more so when our desire for justice starts to bleed into vengeance. Psalm 85 talks about when "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." It is the psalmist's way of saying that *true* peace and justice happens when mercy meets righteousness.

The parable seems to imply that God's justice is both righteous and also far more merciful than earthly judges. The parable isn't about God needing to be convinced like that earthly judge, but about the posture of our own faith in the face of life's injustices. Will we, like the persistent widow, continue to seek justice, even when justice seems delayed or elusive? And will we seek justice that isn't born out of spite or vengeance?

As we move from this place today, let us carry the message of the persistent widow and the promise of God's righteous and merciful justice in our hearts. Let us continue to pray, to act, and to not lose heart, and to trust that in God's perfect timing, justice born of righteousness and mercy, will prevail. I think we know this to be true in our heartstrings here at UMC. May we be instruments of that justice, seeking not vengeance, but true reconciliation and peace in our world.

Amen.