

Sermon for Sunday, October 16, 2016

FINDING NORTH

Luke 18:1-8

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge is perhaps the strangest of all parables. We only find it in Luke's gospel. It is not really tethered to any other text, and the original story told by Jesus is sandwiched between two editorial comments added by the gospel writer concerning "prayer" and "faith." Honestly, it is such a strange parable that my first inclination was to skip it and preach on something else, something "easier." But the thing is, nothing is easy when it comes to the biblical text, when it comes to our relationship with the Bible, and, of course, ultimately with God. So, here I go . . .

The first thing I noticed is that we don't get a whole lot of detail to work with. We have two characters: A judge, who doesn't care about God and disrespects people. And then there's a widow. We know nothing about the case to be adjudicated. We know nothing about the location of the dispute. Which means the content of the case is not important to Jesus.

The second thing I noticed is that the stereotypes we are accustomed to regarding judges and widows do not work here. We might be inclined to think that the unjust judge who hates people is part of a government machinery that churns out cases with little regard for actual persons. We also might be inclined to root for the widow who is often a cipher for the oppressed, the outcast, and the powerless. But on closer inspection, our stereotypes are upended by the parable.

The English translation renders a rather domesticated version of the story Jesus told. It says the widow is seeking justice, when the Greek is crystal clear that she does not want justice: she is out for vengeance, she is out for blood. Furthermore, the English has the judge say that he is annoyed with her and grants her a hearing because she keeps banging on his door. Actually, the judge fears for his life because this widow threatens to beat him up if he doesn't relent. Not really a paragon of a nice meek widow asking politely to be heard.

So, on the one hand we have a corrupt misanthropic judge who doesn't believe anything and who says and does anything just to save his own hide. Linus, one of Charles M. Schulz's Peanuts characters has him pegged: "I love mankind," Linus declares. "It's people I can't stand." On the other hand, we are dealing with a woman who confuses "justice" with "vengeance" and who is not above threatening violence to get her way. If this is indeed a parable about "prayer" and "faith," we are in deep trouble. If we identify God with the judge, God would be unjust, God would not really care about our prayers, and God would only relent to get us off God's back. God would also be a wuss. If we identify God with the woman, we turn God into a vengeful deity who stops at nothing to follow through on God's plan, no matter the cost. And if we identified with either one of the two protagonists, we would not fare any better.

Are you uncomfortable, yet? Well, I am. I think it is clear by now that the default interpretation of this parable as a story about "persistence in prayer" does not work. It is a strange and disturbing story Jesus tells. It shatters our stereotypes about pretty much everything. It forces us to look not at social roles such as "judge" or "widow" but at real people, the kind of people Linus cannot stand. Perhaps we can't, either. And perhaps we recognize traits in ourselves here, which we are reluctant to admit.

What makes me also uncomfortable is that I cannot appeal to either of these two characters as moral exemplars. I would love a "just judge" and a "strong, independent widow with an unflinching sense of

justice.” But that is not what I get. I know that if I were to take sides, I would make excuses for either one of them just so I don’t have to live with the moral ambiguity. But Jesus does not let me get away with that. At least not if I want to be true to myself and to the gospel he proclaims.

When I first read this parable, I was looking for some sort of redeeming quality, for some sort of reconciliation. But I found none. I was also looking for a turn of the story towards compassion, like in Jesus parable of the *Ten Lepers* we heard last Sunday. But I found none. The judge has no compassion for the widow, nor the widow for the judge. It is almost as if I were reading an ancient version, or a Shakespearean version, of our current societal and political climate. I look at all the characters involved in our day and age and find few, if any, redeeming qualities. I find no promise of reconciliation and am horrified at the absence of compassion. I see some protagonists play “duck and cover” and observe others out for vengeance and blood. No moral exemplars here, either.

So what, if any, good news is there in this parable? Have God and Jesus just thrown in the towel and left us to our own devices in a dog-eat-dog fight to the bitter end? I don’t think so. But I do think that Jesus walks us to the brink here in order to take a good long look at ourselves. He wants us to find *North* again as we have gotten lost. He wants us to remember our moral compass. Not the kind of morality we human beings devise, which changes from generation to generation. Bob Dylan, who just won the “Nobel Prize for Literature,” knows that “the times they are a’changing.” I am speaking of the one true North that holds steady whether the times are “favorable or unfavorable,” as Timothy reminds us.

As is often the case, when things get difficult and we struggle mightily, artists can help us express our feelings and thoughts. One of my favorite bands, *The Civil Wars*, have a song called *Finding North*. In it they sing, “Draw me a map that I can hold / Lines that tell me where to go / My head is full of lonely harmonies / and questions no one’s asking me. / Whose gonna take my hand, show me the way? / How long will I have to wait for someday? / It’s not the sky I’m asking for / I’m just having trouble finding north / I’ve gone as far as I can go / Trying to find something that feels like home.”

Perhaps, after all, this turns out to be a parable about prayer. About prayer as our plea for God to take us by the hand and show us the way. A prayer for providing us with a map that helps us in our struggle with “finding north.” And the recognition that no human being, regardless what they might promise us, can take us where we need to go. For only uniting and united in faith, as God’s beloved children, and in reliance of our true moral compass, can we reach our destiny: to be home, with God.

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