

“If There is a Judge Who Will Begrudge”

Sermon by Leah Fowler

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Jeremiah 31:27-34

Luke 18:1-8

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. At the same time, a woman, a widow, came to demand justice from the judge against her opponent. We can only wonder what injustice this woman's opponent had caused her. Did they have an argument in the marketplace? Had her opponent tried to force her off her late husband's property? Had he or she tried to cheat her economically? Had her opponent sexually harassed or assaulted her? We cannot know. What we do know is that this woman, this widow, said **no** to whatever injustice had been done to her. She had a picture of what fairness should be, and she would not settle for less.

It would have been hard for a woman in Jesus' time to argue her case before a judge, especially if her case had been against another man. Yet she persisted. Depending on your perspective, you may call her uppity.

She reminds me of another woman who demanded justice, though she did not get to see enough of it in her lifetime. Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave, abolitionist, and defender of equal rights, gave a speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. Hear her words:

“That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed

and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?...

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them."

Sojourner Truth was ahead of her time, unfortunately. Slavery did not end officially in this country until the 13th amendment was signed in 1865. Women did not get the right to vote until 1920, with the 19th amendment--and some have actually joked that it should be repealed today. We are witnessing in real time the character assassinations that happen when women share stories of harassment or assault, and I tell you it is not just by powerful person; many of us are reminded of the stories that have happened to us. In 11 years of ordained ministry, I have become a container for too many stories like these and I tell you I long for a just ruler to make things right again for people who were told that abuse was their fault, or were just not believed. I long for a just ruler for people who have had difficult memories return these past 2 weeks and are feeling again the anxiety and pain of their original experiences. I long for a judge who fears God and has respect for people.

Jesus told his audience that the judge, annoyed by the badgering of an uppity woman, begrudgingly granted the widow what she was asking, just so that he could be left alone. Even an unjust judge would do this. Even

more so, Jesus tells the people, how much more will God-- who we assume loves us and respects fairness-- will quickly grant justice.

Except some of us still have in our heads a God who is a stern and unjust judge. A God who does not want to be bothered with us. A God who will not listen when we cry out. I don't know how that God got stuck in our heads. Was it because we prayed, and when we did not get answers to our prayers, we lost heart? Is it because, like Jeremiah's audience, all we can see around us is Babylon, and we ask ourselves "How could God have let me arrive here?" Or is it because we judge with sour grapes in our mouths, and cannot conceive of a God whose love is sweet and whose response is swift?

And Jesus takes our notion of this unjust judge, and the flip seems to be that God may be a little bit better than that, if only we persist. *A little bit better?* I lived last in Chicago, and I tell you-- those Chicago sports fans are serious and are nothing if not persistent. They have an eternal optimism, an insistence that their team will win. Chris and I got tickets to a Bears game our last year there-- Bears tickets are very hard to come by, even when the team is not doing so well. But Chicago fans always believe their team *should* be doing well. And so, on every side of us at the Bears game, we had fans shouting at the players and letting them know how much better they ought to be doing. Because they believed their team should be winning. These last days Chicago has seen its persistent hope and loyalty pay off. "Too bad you're no longer living in a city with a winning baseball team," I have been smugly told by more than one of my Chicago friends this week.

I'm not a huge baseball enthusiast, but if my persistence in prayer to God could match the persistence of a Chicago Cubs fan, God and I would be doing alright. The gospel passage seems to suggest that in our persistent reaching for God, we keep the door open so that when God actually does show up, we will be open and ready to receive God.

Consider this though: What if Jesus' very human, relatable metaphor of an unjust judge begrudgingly giving in to a widow's petitions was not meant to point us to a God who is at least better than that? What if Jesus meant for us to discover God in the face of the widow? What if we are the ones who can't be bothered? Could it be that while we have been pursuing God in the form of an unjust judge, God has been actually in the form of a persistent widow, pursuing us, and we have simply not recognized God's unexpected form?

"I will be your God, and you will be my people." This is what God speaks to us through the prophet Jeremiah. These words God will write on our hearts. God will repair and renew any brokenness between us; God forgives our iniquity, and remembers our sin no more. God is not here to judge us. God is here to find us.