

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Jacobson
16 October 2022
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

Year C, Proper 24, Sunday Solemn Mass
Genesis 32:3–8, 22–30; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14–4:5; Luke 18:1–8

I was out one evening this summer with some friends, three couples, and one of them brought along their young daughter, Maia, who was just over a year old. Her mother was trying to get her to eat some sort of baby mush and Maia wanted nothing to do with it.

She kept protesting and her mother kept trying to get her to eat it. Maia was persistent. She wanted the potato chips that were on the table. The rest of us found this to be amusing. We were enjoying our drinks and didn't mind having Maia out with us. I could tell her parents were getting frustrated. At some point, her father gave up and just let her have some potato chips. Maia was thrilled.

Given today's parable by Jesus, I'm wondering if Luke wants us to see our relationship with God the Father in a somewhat analogous way to Maia and her father?

We hear that Jesus tells this parable to the disciples so that they always pray, and then we are given a parable that talks about a widow who keeps nagging a judge until she gets what she wants.

Our translation talks about the judge getting worn out by her, though another way of rendering this playful Greek expression would be that the judge is worried that if he doesn't cave, the old widow will give him a "black eye".¹

If this is meant to tell us about prayer, then should I just keep praying that I'll win the lottery until I ultimately wear God down to the point that he caves, maybe to the point of a black eye, and gives me what I want? I think the message here in Luke that we are supposed to come away with, unfortunately, is more nuanced.

There are two key themes here. The first is certainly about prayer. We're told that Jesus is teaching the disciples that they ought to pray always and not lose heart. Luke then also follows today's reading with another parable about prayer. Both are unique to Luke, who stands out among the Gospel writers in his emphasis of prayer.

The coming of the Son of Man is also in focus here. Our reading ends with: what will the Son of man find when he comes? "Will he find faith on earth?" The prior chapter in Luke that lead into our reading has similar themes and emphasizes the need to

¹ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1043 (ὕπνωπιάζω); Luke 18:5.

prepare and to be ready. And, so, these two themes are intertwined in that Luke sees prayer as central to being ready.

But, our judge doesn't seem ready. We're told that he "neither feared God nor regarded man." He's not a good judge.

A good judge, one who fears God and is familiar with the teachings of Hebrew Scripture, would be focused on caring for widows, the vulnerable in society, and not blowing them off.²

This is a judge who will be judged, we might say. He isn't just. Justice is coming with the Son of Man, but will he find judges or widows when he comes?

So, a contrast between the judge and the widow is being made. She represents those who God favors, those on the wrong side of an imbalance in power and status, a contrast with this so-called judge.

In the parable, however, we're not told that the widow is specifically "good," or even that she prays, but that she's persistent in nagging the judge.

If we look at the type that widows likely represented in the minds of first-century Christians, she is clearly playing the role of the good one. She is both faithful and persistent in her prayer.

In the language of 1 Timothy, "she who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day."³

Earlier on in Luke itself, Anna, who recognizes the infant Jesus as Lord, is also a widow. Luke tells us that Anna was in the Temple, day and night, fasting and praying.⁴ So, we can let the unnamed generic widow of our parable take on these attributes.

In addition, our reading from Genesis is helpful here in thinking about the widow's persistent prayer. Jacob wrestles with God. Isn't that an aspect of the widow not giving up? Wrestling with faith. And, continuing to pray in the face of what seems to be never-ending injustice.

We're told that Jacob "prevailed," but what would it mean to prevail when wrestling with God? Does it mean giving God a "black eye" along the lines of the widow and the judge?

² Sirach 35:15-17, 22-23 as a parallel to Luke 18:1-8; Deuteronomy 24:17-18; Numbers 22:22-24.

³ 1 Timothy 5:5.

⁴ Luke 2:26-38.

We will probably never give God a black eye and get God to conform to our will. But, if in the wrestling, we're conformed more towards God's will, then that would be prevailing. That would be a win. Even if we are the ones who end up with the black eye.

As our parable brings together these themes of prayer, justice, and judgment, we can also bring together the widow and judge, in a sense, to synthesize these two unnamed, somewhat generic, character types into one. What I mean by that is, for example, I can imagine that there are characteristics of both the judge and the widow inside of me.

Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth century deacon and theologian, discusses how the persistence of prayer can lead to our own transformation, to bring us in line with God's will, in a way that's analogous to the persistent widow ultimately getting the judge to do the right thing.⁵

It puts us in the position for God to work on us, to wrestle with us, to change the parts of us that are unjust.

Considering all of this, maybe the example of baby Maia nagging her parents for those potato chips doesn't really get at the heart of this parable.

Or, perhaps it does somewhat in how she is in relationship with her parents and how being in this relationship will continue to form and transform her as she grows. In this sense, it can point us towards something critical about prayer.

If we look across Luke's writings, in this Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, prayer is mentioned at every key turn of the story. It isn't so much that, as it keeps coming up, he is telling us that prayer is about this, or prayer is about that.

Rather, prayer is a constant in Luke's writings because prayer is how we are able to stay in relationship with God, with God's transforming love, even in the face of the injustices of this world. And, through this, God transforms us.

"Jesus told the disciples a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 16.16.