

“Never Give Up: Faith as Tenacious Agitation”

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22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Oct 16, 2016
Jer 31:27-34; 2 Tim 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

E: Thank you Nutana Park for receiving Ched and me yet again this morning. I am so grateful to close our week of work here in Saskatoon at this home place for my heart and spirit. I will always be a child of this congregation. As most of you know, Ched and I have been helping convene a Bartimaeus Institute over at St. Andrew’s College this weekend, which just concluded. More than 100 people from around North America engaged issues of Indigenous justice, and it has been a rich and challenging time. We have a group of Institute participants with us this morning; please welcome them (ask to stand). I also want to acknowledge two groups of friends this morning. One is our cohort of women from around the U.S. who are studying with us at Bartimaeus Institute Online Ministries this year, for whom Nutana provided hospitality this last Thursday evening (ask to stand). These women joined our intrepid staff from Philadelphia and Detroit, who have been working hard these past few days (ask to stand). It is so nice to have my extended family gathered in this way. Ched is now going to offer some thoughts about our gospel reading, and I’ll follow him with some connections to the remarkable gathering we just concluded.

C: The theme of our Institute gathering was “The TRC Calls Churches to Action”—and the same could be said of today’s gospel lesson. The story of the persistent widow offers us an object lesson about “determined prayer,” one of several in Luke. But this story is perhaps a little uncomfortable for prairie Settler Mennonites. After all, it’s about unflagging insistence on being heard—to the point of being rude, even aggressive--and by a woman no less. Not exactly *your* all’s “Quiet in the Land” style. But there it is in our text.

This story is framed as an instructional parable about “not losing hope.” The Greek verb here is used elsewhere in the N.T. to counsel endurance for those facing opposition or discouraging hardship (see 2 Cor 4:1, 16; Gal 6:9; Eph 3:13; 2 Th 3:13). In that sense, this lesson could not be more important to those of us praying and working for justice in today’s world, because these are discouraging, difficult times indeed, from global climate crisis to deepening social inequality to local racist violence of the kind that erupted up near Bigger in August. In such times we are tempted to succumb to “compassion fatigue” or outright denial; but what is *needed*, and what the gospel calls us to, is persistence in what is right.

The gospel scenario pits social *opposites*: a marginalized female protagonist tenaciously demands a measure of justice from a powerful male antagonist. So

this is a story about a world as broken as our own, defined by huge and dehumanizing gender and class gulfs. The scene opens up in “a certain city,” a Greek phrase that suggests that the antagonist in the original tale may have alluded to a notorious political personality of the time. That character is introduced *first* in Luke’s account: he is a judge, but one portrayed in the worst possible light (Lk 18:2). Opposing him “in that same city” is a solitary widow, whose social status was particularly vulnerable in patriarchal antiquity.

This judge is described as “neither fearing God nor having respect for people” (repeated in verses 2 and 4). Now these character traits are exactly *opposite* of what scripture demands from an adjudicator of “justice,” defined concisely by Isaiah 1:17 as to “rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” Indeed, there is a special relationship in the Bible between the vocation of being a “judge” and the plight of widows, which is archetypally exhibited by God’s own example. “For the LORD your God...executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” says Deuteronomy 10:17-18. The same formula is intoned repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Bible: Psalms 72, 82, 94, Isaiah 3, etc. This is why later Jesus calls the antagonist in verse 6 “the unjust judge”—an oxymoron!

Here, then, Luke has drawn us a cartoon of glaring inequality, and of oppression of the vulnerable by the powerful. The plot that now unfolds centers around whether “justice will be gained,” a refrain that echoes through each of its three “scenes”:

- i) In verse 3, the widow persists in demanding justice
- ii) In verse 5, the judge is so worn out that he finally “hears” and grants justice;
- iii) In verses 7-8, Jesus (like the prophets cited above) invokes the divine character as a stark contrast to that of the judge: God will grant justice “quickly” and “without delay.”

It is *only* because of the widow’s tenacity that anything changes here. Her struggle, against all odds, is to “exact justice (Gk *ekdikēsōn*) from my adversary” (Gk *antidikou*)—note the same root in both words. This is an all too familiar scenario still today: to demand that which the “system” in neither inclined nor perhaps *able* to realize fully. Yet demand we must, according to Luke!

That all gender propriety has been exhausted is suggested by the two phrases which explain the judge’s course-reversal. She “keeps bothering me,” he laments, a verb meaning “to make trouble for”—or in modern parlance, to be “a pain in the butt.” But the tipping point is his admission that this widow is “wearing him out.” The Greek verb means literally “to strike under the eye” (hence the term “browbeat”; see 1 Cor 9:27). I suppose we could call that the “punchline” to this story.

Here in verses 6-8 Jesus' "moral" to the story begins. Two more implied characters now enter our consciousness. One is God. The widow's persistence in pressing for what is needed and right is *not* futile because God's very nature is compassion and justice! The verb used throughout Jesus' story connotes the kind of "avenging" justice that relieves the suffering of victims. It often appears in prayers uttered by the first Christians under the seemingly omnipotent boot of the Roman Empire (such as 2 Thess 1:8; Rev 6:10; 19:2). To be sure, these first followers of Jesus understood that ultimately, true "vengeance" is a task for which only God qualifies (Rom 12:19). Yet like Luke here, they also insisted that such *true* justice would arrive *surely* and "*quickly*" (Lk 18:8; see Rom 16:20; Rev 22:6). And somehow, mysteriously, it will be speedier as a result of stubborn human advocacy.

Which brings us to the other "offstage" or implied character in this story: *we* its hearers. Jesus now addresses *us* directly, exhorting us to "listen to what the unjust judge says." Why? I suggest it is because how this antagonist has been portrayed: he's been muttering to himself about this inconvenient widow. This, I would submit, is a classic portrait of how the elite reasons "behind closed doors as it were," ever trying to figure out how to manage protest and dissent. We are never really privy to the thought processes of the powerful; we only see their decisions and the ensuing consequences. That's why it often appears to us that things won't change. But that may be because, Jesus is suggesting, we aren't listening *hard* enough.

Because *beneath* the stubborn silence of the powerful is the *more* stubborn fact that the arc of history, as Martin Luther King famously said, *will* indeed bend toward justice. To believe this is to be able to listen hard for the slow, partial, begrudging, never-enough-yet real turnings of our powerful adversaries. To believe this is to listen *past* the façade of domination for the whispers of redemption. "Another world is not only possible," said Arundhati Roy famously; "on a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

And what about our other faculties of perception? Have we actually "seen" the persistent widow? Not just *observed* her as the protagonist of this story, but truly *encountered* her out there all alone, day after day? If so, why aren't we joining her, doggedly witnessing over the long haul, refusing to give up?

E: This messy, shrill, remarkable story offers, we believe, a poignant portrait *of*, an *apologia for*, and a call *to militant* nonviolent engagement with the Powers. Lindsay Airey here offered reflections earlier this year on how this gospel text illumines and is illuminated by the witness of the uncompromising women of the Detroit water shut-off struggle today, in which she and Tommy have been immersed for the last two years (ask her about it). But this morning we want to correlate this gospel to the powerful testimonies we heard this weekend at our Bartimaeus Institute.

Like the tenacious widow in Luke's story, Indigenous people have been crying out for justice in North America repeatedly, for a half a millennium. And

they have done so despite the powerful adversarial forces of Settler colonization and genocidal policies such as the residential schools. As peoples they have survived against the odds—and they are still persistently seeking justice, as the name of the recent movement suggests: “Idle no More.” Their voice is not going away. We were interested to note that even in the staid, comfortable suburb of Nutana Park we encountered this graffiti on an alley fence: “As long as the sun shines, the waters flow and the grass grows.” That’s *treaty* language, scrawled invasively on our insular landscapes, reminding us of our obligations, as Settlers, to be better Treaty People.

The story of the persistent widow brings two Indigenous women to mind as contemporary analogues. On is **Nora Bernard**, the Mi'kmaq activist of the Millbrook First Nation, who doggedly sought compensation for survivors of the Canadian Indian residential school system. Her tireless 15 years of agitation were directly responsible for what became the largest class-action lawsuit in Canadian history, representing an estimated 79,000 survivors, which the Canadian government settled in 2005. This settlement, in turn, animated the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was the subject of our Institute.

Nora was a strong woman who endured domestic abuse and single parenthood, holding down two jobs while battling for justice. In 1945, when Bernard was 9 years old, her mother was told that if she did not sign the consent forms to send her children to a residential school, the child welfare system would take her children into “protective custody,” forcing Nora to attend the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School for five years.

In 1995, Bernard began an organization to represent survivors of that school; she subsequently convinced Halifax lawyer John McKiggan to represent the Shubenacadie survivors in a class-action suit. This inspired other survivors' associations across Canada to file similar suits, which were eventually amalgamated into one national lawsuit.

Bernard founded the Residential School Survivors Association, and in 2005, testified before the Canadian House of Commons about the abuse children suffered in residential schools. She spoke about the sexual and physical abuse, the loss of language and culture, and other injustices—horrors that were later recounted *ad nauseum* during 7 years of IRS survivor testimony before the TRC. Bernard received part of her residential school compensation in November 2007, some of which she used to pay expenses like phone bills resulting from fellow survivors who called her long distance for advice.

Tragically, Nora Bernard was murdered in December 2007 by her grandson while he was in a drug induced haze--a bitter reminder of the human cost of intergenerational trauma. Yet in class action lawyer McKiggan's words, “...if it wasn't for Nora's efforts...this national settlement never would have happened.” He credited the determined Bernard for *single-handedly* making it happen. A persistent widow whose witness changed Canada forever.

A second woman who comes to mind is someone we've had the privilege of spending the last few days with. Elder Lorna Standingready is also a residential school survivor, who was taken away at age 6 from a life she loved on the reserve, and spent the next 10 years in three separate residential schools – Anglican, United, and Presbyterian. Today she is the Leading Elder of the All Native Circle Conference of the United Church of Canada, representing congregations scattered all over the northern half of Manitoba,

Lorna talked about her time looking through the archives section of the Shaw Centre at the Edmonton TRC hearings. She found pictures of herself and her sisters, and wept as she related their determined strategies to survive the abuses. She was told by other girls “not to let them rule your heart or mind, no matter what they do to your body.” The hardest things she saw besides the sexual abuse were girls tortured as punishment for running away, put in cages like dogs. And she deeply resented their regimented life in which students were called by numbers instead of names.

She said, “I felt dirty all my life, not good enough”. But she is glad she learned English, because it is such an important tool to fight the white power structure. Lorna was a powerful presence during our Institute, as we church folk wrestled with what it means to “see” and “hear” the persistent cries of IRS survivors, and how we can join Indigenous communities in their continuing quest for Treaty justice. She is another remarkable, persistent widow for justice, something recognized by church leaders when they presented Lorna with the photograph on the cover of this morning's bulletin (*right*). A tiny voice in the wilderness who *will* be heard!



According to Jesus' story in today's gospel reading, determined advocacy for justice is *the very definition of "Faith."* Unfortunately, *this* sort of faith is all too scarce in our communities. After all, Jesus wondered aloud at the conclusion to this teaching: “When the Human One comes, will he encounter faith on earth?” (18:8b)

Dear family at Nutana Park, *you* taught me about faith. I was raised here, baptized here. I returned to my home town this week to try to listen to our Indigenous neighbors, to join them in their longstanding vigil for justice. I pray that I, and you, and all of our churches, might take to heart this troubling object lesson given to us by Jesus, that we might recover *this* sort of tenacious, agitating faith, in order to become more determined Treaty People. And may we never give up our quest for restorative justice for all, “As long as the sun shines, the waters flow and the grass grows.” Amen.