

Chapter 7

TRUTH SPEAKS TO POWER

“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 opponent.’”

—Luke 18:2–3

JESUS TELLS THE DISCIPLES A PARABLE THAT ADDRESSES two concerns. First, he intends that disciples should “pray always” (18:1). Earlier in the Gospel of Luke he had already given his disciples instruction in prayer. That instruction included what we call the Lord’s Prayer, which pivots on asking (Luke 11:1–13). Prayer is putting one’s self in an acknowledged state of dependence that relies on the gifts of God for life in the world. Jesus assures that “the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask” (11:13). Theologian Karl Barth said that prayer is indeed “simply asking.”¹ The parable is instruction in *asking*.

Jesus tells his disciples the story in Luke 18 so that they do not “lose heart” (v. 1), that is, so that they do not become discouraged and quit hoping. The

parable exhibits the relentlessness of refusing silence, the unwavering resolve to continue to speak and to ask. The inference is that the very act of prayer is a way to remain courageous, a way to resist resignation that would result in losing heart. The antidote to such defeat is the act of prayer, so prayer has an instrumental purpose. In this introduction Jesus does not assure the disciples that prayers are answered but only that the act of prayer is itself an act of resistance against discouragement and defeat.

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Thus Jesus establishes a direct connection between *prayer* and not *losing heart*. The negative inference is that the disciples who do not “pray always,” that is, stay linked to God in asking, will, sooner or later, “lose heart.” Disciples do not have sufficient resources on their own to sustain a life of obedience but instead depend on God’s continuing gifts in response to continual asking.

THE JUDGE AND THE WIDOW

As a master storyteller Jesus quickly invites his listening disciples into a freighted interaction. The interaction could happen anywhere: “In a certain city . . .” (v. 2). It features a judge and a widow. The judge is portrayed as cynical and indifferent; he “neither feared God nor had

respect for people.” Anything can happen in a parable, but we should not fail to notice that the parable permits this judge to be a stand-in for God, to whom petitions must be addressed. Of course a parable allows distance as well as identity, and we need not draw the connection of judge and God too closely. Nevertheless, if we track the parable, we may have a glance at a God who is indifferent and unresponsive.

The widow, on the other hand, is a recipient of injustice. Well, of course she was! In a patriarchal society widows are sure to be victimized because they have no male advocate. It is for this reason that the Torah repeatedly summons ancient Israel to care for widows (along with orphans and immigrants, the two other classes of patriarchal victims). The widow is resourceless. Again we should notice the implied parallel, even as we acknowledge that the parable allows distance as well as identity. We should not fail to notice that the parable presents the widow as a stand-in for the disciples, for in the rough and tumble of power the disciples are like the widow, powerless and vulnerable.

Thus the stage is set for a transaction between a cynical, indifferent judge and a resourceless widow who has been victimized. The alert listener is free to compute this as a transaction between a God who has gifts to give but who is indifferent about need and disciples who depend on these gifts in a world of jeopardy. The interaction between the judge and the widow is an asymmetrical one. But perhaps that is the point. The act of prayer is an asymmetrical one between a God who is addressed but perhaps not responsive and disciples who are needy and resourceless. And Jesus urges

his disciples, “Stay active in this transaction, for staying active in this transaction will fend off despair.”

BREAKING THE SILENCE OF CONFORMITY

The interaction between the imperious judge and the needy widow is in three parts. First, the widow addresses the judge with an imperative: “Grant me justice” (v. 3). In the context of the story, it is a remarkable statement. No one would have expected a widow to speak up in court. No one would have thought the widow had justice on her horizon, or any sense of legitimate entitlement. Her bid for justice constitutes a recognition that the cards have been stacked against her and she has been exploited. In a patriarchal society such exploitation of a widow would have been business as usual, and she would have expected nothing other than that. But she does! She breaks the silence of conformity. She speaks out against the miscarriage of justice that would have seemed normal and routine in a patriarchal society. Indeed, we might imagine that some saw her bid as uppity. She filed a case in court that called into question what was taken for normal. She breaks the silence of conformity not only once, but she “kept coming” to the judge, speaking up repeatedly in court, perhaps regularly filing new claims and making new charges. It is no wonder that she is popularly labeled as “importunate” (au. trans.), a fancy term that means to “nag,” or more respectably, to “urge irksomely.” We can imagine that every time she showed up at the court, the clerks there all groaned because they knew what she wanted

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Second, the judge was unresponsive to her bid: “For a while he refused” (v. 4). He had no time for her claim. Likely he found some technical objection, some procedure that she did not carefully follow. She could not get a hearing from the judge. Of course it is like that in prayer because when we “pray always,” we sometimes get a refusal because God is not an automaton of response, even as the judge had a dozen reasons for refusing her case.

But third, the judge relents, because her “urging irksomely” became too much for the judge to bear:

“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.” (v. 4)

This all happened “later.” We are not told how much later, but it is after “for a while.” The indifference of the judge, while long-lasting, did not and could not last as long as the urgent resolve of the widow. The judge, in his self-definition, confirms that he has no

fear of God and no respect for anyone. As he knew, judges in their court rooms are as “gods” who are not called to account by anyone. They may be variously unresponsive or irresponsible or just quirky. We see it all the time. The judge has no interest in hearing the widow’s case, no interest in her petition for justice. But finally she, by her continuing to speak out and break the silence of normal patriarchal protocols, prevails. She wears him out. NRSV adds as a note: “so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.” Her pesky resolve was indeed a slap in the face to the dignity of this judge who would not want to be exposed to such verbal harassment as her endless petition constituted. Thus by her refusal to be silent she got justice from a judge who never intended her to have justice. The widow beat the judge! Need overcame imperiousness. The truth of the widow’s situation overwhelmed the imperious power of the court. Justice prevailed because she broke the silence and resolutely continued to break that silence.

WEAR GOD OUT IN PRAYER

In verse 6 Jesus steps out of the parable to address the disciples whom he has been instructing. He urges that the concession speech by the judge is what should be heeded. The judge had ruled for the widow because she had worn him out. That is the core of Jesus’ instruction: Wear God out in prayer!

This counsel is followed by two questions with implied answers. First, “Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?”

(v. 7). The answer is “Yes,” yes God will! Yes, God will grant justice to “his chosen ones,” the disciples who persist in their cry that voices both the urgency of pain and the formality of legal claim. That is the ground for “Pray always,” because the God addressed in such urgent prayer finally will answer and give justice. Such an answer, however, depends on praying “always.”

Second, Jesus asks the disciples, “Will he delay long in helping them?” (v. 7). No, there will be no long delay. God will give justice “quickly.” I suppose that in the parable “quickly” is computed as “later,” though we are not told how much later. These two questions look back to the introductory verse before the parable had begun. The insistent admonition is “Pray always and don’t lose heart.” The two questions in verse 7 with their implied answers are an assurance that praying “always” will bring justice “quickly.” The introductory verses of the parable are an access point; the verse makes clear that a bid for justice from God requires breaking the silence of conventional protocol and dissenting. Even the power of God will not and cannot finally resist the bodily truth of the widow. It is conventional to assume that power in the world, even the power of God, does not need to answer to truth. But the parable tells otherwise and contradicts conventional assumptions. In the parable such power finally cannot resist the truth. An inkling of this claim is voiced in the Civil War verse of James Russell Lowell:

Though the cause of evil proper,
Yet the truth alone is strong;
 Though her portion be the scaffold,
 And upon the throne be wrong.

Yet that scaffold sways the future,
 And behind the dim unknown,
 Standeth God within the shadow,
 Keeping watch above his own.²

Truth is on the scaffold, about to be executed. The poem’s final stanza is introduced by “Yet” (that reiterates the “yet” of the preceding verse), which contradicts usual assumptions. This “yet” is a belated echo of the “yet” of verse 5 in the parable. In both cases “yet” tells otherwise and disrupts usual thinking. In the parable the “yet” allows that the capricious judge must give in to the resolve of the widow. In Lowell’s poem the “yet” insists that the “execution of truth” is not the end of the story. God protects “his own,” who in the parable is the insistent widow and in the text are the disciples as “his chosen ones” who are being instructed. God finally keeps watch for “his own,” even against the predatory forces that govern by silence.

FAITH

The final verse of the parable text addresses the prospect of ultimate hope for the coming of “the Son of Man” (v. 8). The question posed in the verse is not about “the Lord’s return” or the “Second Coming.” It is rather about finding faith. In this context, faith consists in the resolve to seek justice. Faith is both the conviction that

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justice can be accomplished and the refusal to accept injustice. Thus in the parable the widow is an embodiment of profound, radical faith. Against all odds, against the silence of normalcy, she never doubted that justice could be had. Thus John Donahue can conclude about the parable:

Luke understands continual prayer not simply as passive waiting but as the active quest for justice.³

Had she not had faith, the widow would have ceased to cry out. Had the disciples not had faith, they would not have prayed “always.” Had they not prayed always, they would have lost heart. Thus the final verse is a crucial reflection on the company of Jesus and what it means to be in his company, perhaps a great hope or perhaps a great honesty about the reality of losing heart. What is clear is that faith is not a cognitive or creedal matter. It is rather a deep conviction that justice on the ground can be acquired, but it requires the breaking of silence before every indifferent judge, on earth and in heaven.

JUBILEE

We may usefully reflect on the relationship of this instruction about prayer with the “Lord’s Prayer” of Luke 11:2–4. When we move from this destabilizing parable to the familiar prayer, we get more concern for justice. Sharon Ringe has gone so far as to suggest that the Lord’s Prayer “can legitimately be called a jubilee prayer, that is, a prayer that God’s Jubilee will come soon.”⁴

The Jubilee, characterized in Leviticus 25 and anticipated in Isaiah 61:1 (on which see the quote in Luke 4:18–19), provided for the forgiveness of debts, the restoration to the land, and rest for the land. The diminishment of land and people results from relentless predation that ends in hopeless indebtedness, to which the Jubilee provided relief according to the Torah of God. Thus we may propose that the “justice” sought in the parable is, for the widow and for her hopelessly indebted neighbors, a petition that the Jubilee be enacted, that debts be forgiven, and that socioeconomic restoration for the “left behind” be implemented. In the parable the judge grants justice, and we may imagine that his act was indeed a cancellation of debts that permitted restoration of the widow to a viable life.

Read this way, the two prayers—the Lord’s Prayer and the relentless petition of the widow—concern the enactment of Jubilee. The “faith” sought by the Son of Man is the conviction that the Jubilee is possible and will be enacted, for it is only debt cancellation that opens historical possibility for the hopelessly indebted. The breaking of silence by the widow—and by the church when it prays the Lord’s Prayer—is an act of vigorous faith that the Jubilee may yet come about. Such a this-world action in the political economy is of course an outrageous expectation, but that is the intent of both prayers. Such an expectation, however, is congruent with the recurring accent on economic justice in Luke, an accent introduced by Luke already in the initial Song of Mary:

“He has filled the hungry with good things,
and send the rich away empty.”
(Luke 1:53)

In “normal” politics, Jubilee is not possible. But the silence of normalcy (the normalcy of hopeless indebtedness) can be broken! Thus David Graeber, in his masterful study of the long, hopeless history of debt, ends his historical review with the judgment that it is only Jubilee and debt cancellation that make any societal future possible.⁵ In drawing such a conclusion, Graeber of course echoes the tradition of Moses and of Jesus, and stands alongside the widow in her relentless cry.

LUKE ECHOES THE ELISHA STORY

We may conclude that this odd parable (offered only in Luke) is reflective of Israel’s memory of Elijah and Elisha, who were quite practical performers of something like Jubilee.⁶ More specifically, Elisha had ministered to a “wealthy women” by restoring her son who had died (2 Kgs. 4:8–37). Later on this same woman had relocated due to a famine and had been gone from her property for seven years (2 Kgs. 8:1–2). During that time her property had been assigned to others, surely the way the property of an absent woman would have been handled. When she returned home after the famine, her property was all lost to her. She is, however, a determined woman (that is, full of faith in the delivery of justice), and so she files an appeal (the text says she “cried out”[au.trans.]) to the king for the recovery of her lost property. The (nameless) king who hears her

appeal is reported to be in the conversation with Elisha, who had done “great things” of restoration, including restoring the dead son of this woman. Perhaps it was the pressure and influence of Elisha that prompted the king to act when he received the petition of the woman. The king is reminded that Elisha had “restored” the son, and now the king has his chance to “restore” her property; he readily acts on her behalf:

So the king appointed an official for her, saying,
“Restore all that was hers, together with all the revenue of the fields from the day that she left the land until now.” (2 Kgs. 8:6)

This was the king’s “great thing” in the wake of Elisha. The king settles only this single case, but it is an instance of Jubilee for the woman whereby she is rehabilitated to her former life of well-being. I submit that our parable in Luke is an echo of the Elisha narrative.⁷ In both texts the woman seeks justice and restoration, which are granted. In both cases the woman breaks the silence. In both cases the woman acts in faith, believing that justice is on offer for her.

The parable continues to be addressed to the church, the belated company of Jesus’ disciples. The great temptation of the church is to accept the “normalcy” of this world with its penchant for hopeless indebtedness. Clearly faith is silence breaking with confidence that God’s future—now to be performed—leads to correct the predatory practices against widows and other vulnerable persons. In the short run, the ones who administer the levers of power (like the judge or the king) need not heed the truth of these women.

Yet “later” it turns out otherwise, because she prayed “always” with pesky irksomeness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What does this parable teach about how to pray?
2. What does the parable teach about faith?
3. What is the silence that needs to be broken in this story?
4. Where do you see examples of this type of faith being practiced today?