
The Importunate Widow and the Unrighteous Judge

An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler

Across the country, many of us heard fine sermons last Sunday, about the need to pray always. The gospel for the day was the familiar parable about the importunate widow and the unjust judge. Yes, it is a familiar story, but it is also slippery. Just who are we supposed to be imitating, or relating to? Here's the passage:

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "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.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, '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.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:1-8)

We might think that the story is about the need to pray always. After all, the gospel writer Luke seems to say the story is about that. And the parable works well that way. The widow keeps coming, continually, to the unjust judge, even to the point of bothering him. And thus, finally, the unjust judge relents and grants her request – whatever it was. So she becomes our model of perseverance in prayer.

But I am struck by the entire eight verses of the passage, taken as a whole. What are we to make of that last verse, about the Son of Man coming and finding faith on earth? Why is that verse even included in the story?

I suggest another powerful interpretation of the parable. What if we see ourselves, not as the widow, but as the judge? Yes, I suggest that we might do well to see ourselves as the unjust judge. In my view, such an interpretation of the parable hinges upon two words, the words "unjust" and "coming."

First, I prefer that the word "unrighteous" be used for "unjust." As many of you know, that word "righteous" keeps occurring in the Bible; and I have learned, over and over again, to define "righteous" as "right relationship." The characters in the Bible who are righteous are those who are in relationship: relationship with God and with neighbor. Plainly, the unrighteous judge is described as being out of relationship; he had "no fear of God and no respect for anyone."

It is the importunate widow who keeps "coming" to him, over and over again, essentially forcing him to pay attention, forcing him to be in relationship.

Then, it is that word "come" which appears in the last verse, too, verse 8. Except this time, it is the Son of Man—Jesus—who comes. I believe that Jesus can be well described as the importunate widow, the one who keeps coming, over and over again, praying that we—humanity—be in relationship. Jesus calls us to righteousness, which is "right relationship," over and over. We are the unrighteous judge in the story, the one being asked to be in relationship, to have faith.

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will Jesus find people living in relationship, in holy community, fearing God, and respecting persons? At Romans 3:21-22, Saint Paul says that "the righteousness of God has

been revealed through faith in Jesus Christ.” Having faith in God is, indeed, how Paul views righteousness. Having faith in God is being in holy and right relationship. Like an importunate widow, Jesus comes to us over and over again urging just that: right relationship.

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