

The persistent widow: The upside-down parable?

[Luke 18:1-8](#) Gospel reading for Sunday 20th October

It might be time for a disclaimer of sorts!

In writing Gospel Reflections, I am not pretending to have the correct view, or any form of superior view. Where possible however, I like to search beyond the usual understanding, by digging around for something a little different to challenge people's thinking, as well as trying to reflect on how the passage informs the activities of a Lutheran school in the 21st century. The views expressed are not simply my personal views but have been based on quite a wide selection of reading. I value the site 'textweek', that posts a fabulous collation of commentaries, from pastors, Lutheran theologians, seminary lecturers and biblical scholars from all around the world, always focusing on the single lectionary reading for the week. On those occasions when I might offer an alternative perspective, I do not wish to diminish the value of any previous thoughts readers may have had on the passage, in fact for some, it may rather serve to reinforce them! In any case, if some different perspectives manage to fire up passion for reflecting on Scripture, then that would have to be a positive outcome.

The beauty of Scripture is that we can get so much out of it at so many different levels. Remember that Jesus was quite intentionally cryptic with His teaching, in fact He openly declared that He did not want the people to understand! (yet). (See Mark 4 – *The purpose of the Parables.*) Perhaps through the genius of His teaching, He constructed His lesson plans with differentiated curriculum already built in for us. As we sift through to discern the different levels of interpretation, there is no doubt that we have a considerable advantage by being able to hear these stories standing on the other side of the cross, equipped with the bigger picture view of the implications of the Gospel.

I suppose the usual interpretation of the *Parable of the widow and the judge* and by far the most common thread of thinking amongst commentators, is that it is about persistence, commitment, repetition and discipline in our prayer life. Not surprisingly perhaps, given the above introduction, I would like to offer an alternative view.

At face value, doesn't it seem odd to associate God with an unjust judge who has no real concern for treating people with dignity and respect? Does it also seem a bit strange that it promotes an image of an un-loving, un-caring God who seems to treat authentic prayers with contempt and only answers prayer if we keep on nagging Him, to the point that if we nag long enough, almost regardless of what we are nagging about, we will get it? Even though Luke adds opening verses that suggest an interpretation of the parable, we should not let this distract us from a possible alternative level of interpretation.

Let's see what happens when we view the parable through the lens of the upside-down thinking of God, in fact by turning the parable itself upside-down. Bear in mind that Jesus has just reeled of a string of teaching lessons picturing God as crazy, outlandish and controversial in His thinking, consistently poles apart from the normal expectations of Jewish society: The lost son is unconditionally received back, totally ignoring the accepted culture of the day; the crazy shepherd leaves 99 sheep total at risk to try to rescue one ridiculous miserable loser of a sheep; the rich (Jewish) man is denied a place in heaven at the expense of the (Gentile) scumbag Lazarus; the Samaritan leper of all people is saved!

But what if WE are the judge, and GOD is the nagging widow?

When we are cast as the judge, many of the characteristics typified by sinful human nature start to shine through. For example, the ease with which we ignore God and lose respect for people (regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.); the way that we allow our egos to dominate and our natural instinct to look for what is in it for us.

But the real face of a loving God shines through as He nags us with persistent love for us. God is the 'hound of heaven' who wears us down, like the widow, by constantly looking out for us, continually trying to attract our attention. He is relentless in trying to break down our defenses, never giving up, despite us repeatedly shutting the door in His face. Hopefully in the end we respond and let God enter our lives. Maybe it is not primarily about prayer at all!

Note that this upside-down view, if it is not directly about prayer, ironically indirectly gives us a completely different (and more appropriate?) perspective of prayer. In this inverted mode of thinking, prayer does not have us make demands on God, but places us in readiness for, alert to and listening for the "demands" that God may be making of us! Prayer in this contemplative format then, is the conduit through which it is possible for this pursuing God to enter our lives and challenge us to change our self-centred behavior.

I really like this alternative interpretation, because I think it gives us a better picture of who God is and how He operates. It follows on neatly from Luke 15 too, where in "the lost" parables we see God taking the initiative to seek us out.

It is a reminder for us in our schools to challenge and guide young people in the exploration of more contemplative forms of prayer. We need to subtly work towards a reduced focus on prayer as asking (for a great big long list of things), while simultaneously encouraging prayer as listening, where we help our students to be aware of the face and voice of God in their lives and what He may be saying to them.

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