

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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There are some people who are fountains of proverbial expressions. That is, proverbs of various genera flow from their mouths with ease. They spout off phrases like, “a watched pot never boils,” or, “all’s fair in love and war,” or, my mother’s go-to “better safe than sorry.” And it was another one of my mother’s favorite proverbs that immediately came to mind when I heard today’s parable, namely, “the squeaky wheel gets the oil.” Have any of you ever heard that before? Basically, it’s about how the most noticeable or loudest problems are most likely to get attention.

And, isn’t that what’s going on in today’s parable? There we heard of a widow who was stuck working with an “unjust” judge in the midst of a corrupt justice system. In this short parable, *twice* we were told that the judge neither feared God nor respected people (verses 2 and 4). In verse 3, we heard the widow tell the judge to “grant me justice against my opponent.”

Now, let’s unpack that for a minute. I mean, most people like to win. But, this widow had more than a desire to be on the winning side. Dr. Brittany Wilson notes that if we literally translate the Greek, we discover that the widow asked for justice against one who has already treated her unjustly. That is, this widow wasn’t on the offense, but she’s on the defense. This widow was trying to regain something that was already lost. But, this judge didn’t care about the impacts of injustice. For, he doesn’t care about people. And, he certainly doesn’t care about this poor, lowly widow because his sights were set on a Supreme Court nomination or something of the sort.

But let's not forget the context of this story. Dr. Wilson also reminds us that, "In biblical texts, widows are counted among the most destitute of society, alongside other vulnerable groups such as the poor, orphans, and resident aliens. Because of this precarious social and economic position of such groups, biblical texts also make provisions for them, helping to ensure they do not fall victim to exploitation (for example, Exodus 22:21-25; 23:6-9; Deuteronomy 24:14, 17-18; Isaiah 1:17)." So, while this widow was initially taken advantage of by the system, the widow chose to resist the exploitation leveled against her. Perhaps her mother taught her what my mother taught me, that is, "the squeaky wheel gets the oil." This widow might have known the stories of other biblical widows before her, like Tamar (Genesis 38), Ruth, and Naomi.¹ This widow might have known that she was going to need to take things into her own hands. And, she did. She became a squeaky wheel, she became a troublemaker, and because the judge didn't want to deal with it, he granted her justice. The squeaky wheel finally got that oil!

If you're anything like me, when I read this parable I gravitate towards aligning myself with people in the parable. My natural tendency is to connect with the widow, but it's much more difficult to see myself as the unjust judge. And, it's a fruitful spiritual exercise filled with self-examination and the potential of growth to find a bit of yourself in each character. For, there are the moments where I am like that unjust judge. There are times where we, like that judge, fail to respect all people. Those moments where the other's humanity is overshadowed by our own self-interest. It's the moments where we are so fixated on our own lives that we forget what impact we have on another. Those times when we have no concern for the ways that our cars, airplanes, and daily habits are literally robbing the vulnerable from their lands, their

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4201

future, and their health. It's the unjust and unexamined ways that we operate in the world that are a form of ecological colonialism of global proportions. Or, what about the ways we, like the unjust judge, don't respond to the injustice of workers, teachers, and delivery workers until our daily routines become compromised by their endless squeaks. Or, how about when we only begin to open our ears to the squeaks that people of color have been making in our country when it becomes so inconvenient for us because the wheel is stuck and that wheel is going to break apart if we don't give it some oil. You see, sometime we, like that judge, only respond to the squeaks of injustice when they become squawks so unbearable that we cannot ignore them any longer.

So too, there are moments in life, where we are the ones squeaking. Places where we are like the widow crying out for justice. Times when we yearn for all to be heard. A day when sexism, heterosexism, ageism, racism, classism, ableism, sizeism, and nativism become words for historians. We embrace the squeaky demeanor of the widow as we write a letter or visit our congress people for the billionth time. We resist with the widow when we march for true justice for the minority. We embody the widow when we squeak in systems of injustice until justice is released.

And, so we see in the parable our two-faced situation. It's a situation where we are the judge and the widow, and the place where we squeak and we oil. But the real kicker in today's reading is far less about us and more about our God. For, Jesus jumps in and reminds us that our squeaks do not go unnoticed. Our God has wicked good hearing for the cries of humankind. For no one squeaks louder for justice than our God. And, at the same time, our God abundantly provides oil to ease the pain and bring about justice.

You see, during Sloane and Charleston's baptisms and during your baptism, the pastor takes oil and greases the wheel. It's a cross-shaped smear of oil. A smear that forever lubricates us to respond to injustice. It's oil that reminds us that, oftentimes, the injustice we perpetuate comes from our fears—fears that there aren't enough food, money, land, resources, or time. A fear that our God cannot and will not provide, and so we worship fear. But, our oiled forehead reminds us of God's goodness—our God comes to bring relief, transformation, and, in Abram's case, a blessing even if we resist God's justice.

So, friends, that's what we're working with today. We have a God who hears our squeaks for justice, a God who swiftly responds to our squeaks with liberating oil, a God who reminds us that although injustice runs rampant in our world, we have a holy calling to be the oil to the squeaks of injustice, we have an opportunity to reflect God's justice, and we have the gift of encountering God's love each day. Amen.