

# Matters of the Heart

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**Third Presbyterian Church**

**October 16, 2016 (Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost)**

**Luke 18:1-8**

I begin with a confession. It was really hard for me not to hear today's parable without the overlay of our present-day political circus. Consider the main characters: A marginalized woman begging to be believed, begging for justice, and a public figure who "neither feared God nor respected people." Kimberly Bracken Long called the judge in this tale a "rotten politician." If CNN had existed back in the New Testament World, they might have been all over this story.

It was also hard for me not to see a classic comedy sketch in this story – one in which a frail, little old woman whacks the stuffing out of a bumbling thief with her purse, sending him away humiliated and licking his wounds. Which actually might not be that far off.

Imagine with me the woman in Jesus' story, as she prepares to march resolutely toward the judge. Imagine as she takes a deep breath, pauses for a moment to summon her courage to confront him and demand justice. Imagine her as she realizes she has to do this yet again, for the umpteenth time, to fight for what's rightfully hers.

She's a widow, and as widow in the first century world, she likely has no way to support herself financially. Ancient Hebrew law didn't allow her to inherit her dead husband's estate; it went to his sons and brothers instead. She'll survive if they do the right thing, and help support her. If they do what the Hebrew law required, and return her wedding dowry to her, she'll at least have something. But she's completely at their mercy to follow that law. And if they don't, she has no money, and she needs some legal recourse. That's one very plausible story behind the story, one possible reason she needs the judge to help her.

But now there's another problem. In her world, a woman's place is in the private realm of home and family. But the public arena of business, finance, and law – that's not a widow's (or any woman's) place. She needs a male family member to speak publicly on her behalf, but she doesn't have one. So here she is – a widow, with no money, no kin, and no voice; no power, no sway, no influence.

Are you beginning to see why she might be desperate? Why she's vulnerable? Her very survival is at stake.

If your survival were at stake, what would you do? You'd do what you have to. If you have to go places you normally don't, if you have to plead for what you need every single day, day after day after day, you do it.

It's what the widow does. She crosses the boundary from the private world where society says she belongs, to the public world where she doesn't belong. She marches on to fight for what what's being held back from her. This poor woman heads over to the city gate where all the men hang out and marches right past them to find the judge. She's daring. She's desperate. She's determined.

But humans, being what they often are, passively or actively ignore injustice. And so it is with this judge. He's supposed to uphold the Hebrew law. He's supposed to settle disputes. He's supposed to listen fairly to all sides. And in the case of widows, he's supposed to make sure she receives food, care, and financial support. He's supposed to make sure everyone does the right thing.

But he refuses to pay any attention to her. Day after day, week after week, the judge pushes the widow aside. And day after day, week after week, she returns and cries out for justice. And day after day, week after week, the widow is rejected by the person and system that's supposed to protect those who are most vulnerable.

I imagine the judge counts on the widow to remain in her "proper" place. I imagine he counts on her to keep quiet and suffer in silence. And I imagine him growing increasingly hostile as she makes so much noise, out in public, no less. I imagine as she pummels him with constant pleas in front of the whole city, it's becoming a public relations nightmare – not just for the judge, but for her opponent who's holding back what's rightfully hers.

There's a reason we are still reading these ancient Scripture stories thousands of years later. Because they speak truth about who we are and the urgency of who we're called to be.

Today we observe The Children's Sabbath, where thousands of faith communities around the country focus on improving the lives of children and their families, especially those most vulnerable, living in poverty, or suffering from abuse and neglect.

In my humble opinion, no one speaks the uncomfortable truth about the state of our nation's children better than Marion Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund and initiator of the Children's Sabbath. And she doesn't hold back. Her words are very hard for us to hear. Yet I think part of our call is to risk the extreme discomfort of hearing them.

She writes: "People of faith and goodwill must put their bodies and souls in motion to curb morally obscene and indefensible child poverty rates; wealth and income inequality; massive

miseducation of poor children of color; preventable hunger and homelessness; mass incarceration and unjust criminal justice systems that criminalize the poor; and bullying and demagogic politicians encouraging assault of nonviolent protesters.”

Nationally, more than one in five children lives in poverty. In the city of Rochester, it’s more than one in two – 52-1/2 percent – the highest in the nation. Our hearts have to break over this reality.

Edelman goes on to say that, “The time is ripe right now to do what is right and reject the ugliness, violence, demagoguery and greed that have permeated far too much of our political discourse. We must move forward and not backward and teach our children how to disagree strongly without disagreeing wrongly.”

When I put Marion Wright Edelman’s challenge side-by-side with Jesus’ parable, I can see the church in one of three possible places in the story.

I hope we won’t be the judge in this tale. I hope we won’t be ones who are annoyed by the persistent cries of the widow. I hope we won’t be the ones who categorically blame her for her own circumstance.

And I hope we won’t be the rest of the widow’s community, whose silence in this story is deafening. I hope we won’t be the ones standing idly by. I hope we won’t be the ones who aren’t paying attention enough to hear her. I hope we won’t be the ones who assume that someone else is taking care of her.

I do hope we will take our cues from the widow who refuses to be ignored. The story doesn’t tell us, but I imagine she could have children who share her plight. I do hope we will join her in her persistence on behalf of what’s right and moral and just, until the judge’s resistance finally breaks down.

On this Children’s Sabbath, we can join the widow in her pleas for justice by signing a letter advocating for increased child care subsidies in our own county, so that our families who live in poverty can afford to have their children cared for. If you do nothing else today, I hope we will all do one simple thing, and make our way to the table at coffee hour in the Celebration Center and sign that letter. We will take them over to the Children’s Agenda office, where they’ll be joined with those from faith communities around the city, and given to our county elected officials. You don’t even have to mail it yourself!

And I hope we will all tune our ears more closely to the stories of children in our community – young people arrested for “driving while black,” children whose schools are overwhelmed by

the impact of trauma. I hope we will challenge the use of coded language that not-so-innocently disparages children of color and immigrant children.

I hope we will join the work of advocacy organizations to help right the wrongs that plague our community's children. I'm more than happy to give anyone recommendations!

I hope we'll support the Presbyterian Church's Educate a Child, Transform the World initiative, to improve the quality of education both nationally and internationally. I hope we will create the political will to dismantle our segregated education environment.

For those that are able, I hope we will offer tangible support to children in need – sign up to tutor at school 3 or 35 or East High, or providing a school uniform through the drive we'll be conducting over the next couple of weeks, or offer our time at Cameron Community Ministries, or provide financial resources needed for that work.

And I hope against hope that we will all pray with persistence on behalf of all children and youth. I hope we will pray with dogged determination for every person who ministers to their physical and emotional and spiritual needs. For Maggi Dawn writes, "Prayer as Jesus taught it ...is about refusing to believe that the way things are has to be the way they will always be, about imagining how the world could be, and gaining the wisdom and the energy to bring it about."

So I hope we will pray with tenacity, with purpose, and most of all, with hope, for Jesus' parable of the widow and the judge contains an interesting twist. The judge finally does the right thing for the widow, but he does it for all the wrong reasons. He grants justice, not because his small heart suddenly grows three times larger that day; and not because he takes God's law seriously. He grants justice because simply put, she nags him until he can't take it anymore.

And then Jesus said to his disciples, "If this is what the corrupt judge does, how much more will your trustworthy God do? How much more?"

If we listen to Jesus' words closely, we discover that God isn't just quicker than the judge, or more ethical. God isn't just a better judge than humans. You see, for God to do justice is consistent with God's very being. God is even able to bring about justice in spite of every human tendency to the contrary. God chooses the unchosen. God chooses the vulnerable to be God's very own children.

On this Children's Sabbath, pray with persistence, and do not lose heart. Pray for justice. Pray with your words. Pray with your actions. And pray in hope, for if this is what mere mortals can do, how much more can God do?

Amen.