

The Parable of the Persistent Widow:

Luke 18 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. **2** He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. **3** And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, **5** yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. **7** And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? **8** I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Story of somebody going back after continually getting rejected.

Background:

- Context: In this time period, widows were the ultimate figure of an oppressed person. In terms of gender identity and class, she had nothing. In this highly patriarchal society, women are dependent on husbands, fathers, and sons. If you become widowed, you have no means of supporting yourself, you become a liability, you're unnecessary for society or for economics, and you're essentially dispensable. Presume about the widow's "adversary" is someone who is taking her land in payment for a debt. Not only is she set up as disadvantaged in all these ways, someone's trying to take whatever is left of what she does have.
- You've been in a series called "Why we hurt each other." For those who weren't here: Leah's sermon series explaining why and how societies violently turn to scapegoats or single-victims to project their collective anxiety and fear. But how the scriptures, the Old and New testament, show us a different, alternative way to this cycle of violence. Last week you all discussed Jesus coming to provide liberation for oppressed communities that have been scapegoated and to provide an alternative way to the cycle of violence by being the ultimate scapegoat and overcoming the system through his resurrection. The series has been really robust, really timely, and really helpful in giving us a framework to theologically and intellectually understand how and why our current political climate is the way it is.
- And so going back to this parable, I would say it's common for mob/majority culture to project their fear and anxiety onto people like widows. People like widows, people with disabilities, women, mixed race Samaritans were commonly scapegoated, going through a very intentional process of dehumanization and dismissal, getting blamed for larger societal failures or spiritual ills, and becoming institutionally and culturally excluded. And these were the folks that Jesus came to hang out with. Not only that, this whole process was something Jesus was intimately familiar with.
- So what I'm here to talk about today is the perspective and the experience of being the widow scapegoat. It's great if we have this theological framework, but what is the scapegoat left with? What happens when you have gone the process of dehumanization and dismissal, what happens when you embody multiple marginalized identities that have been dehumanized, what happens when you're being retriggered of your own

trauma everyday by this current Administration? Where is the good news and how does this series, this Bible, this God speak to you?

So we're going to look to the text, specifically at the widow. The widow is persistent - "kept coming to him with the plea, Grant me justice against my adversary."

- This situation of persistence in the face of rejection isn't necessary like a love interest or a job - because of her social position and the gravity of the offense, this is about her survival. This is high stakes.
- Pose the question: Does the judge ever hear her? No. He grants her justice but it's only because he's threatened by her. But every single time this woman shows up to tell her story, he doesn't really get it. Nor does it seem like he really tries to.
- Questions to guide us through this talk:
 - What is empowering this widow to keep pushing and speaking her truth?
 - What does it take for the widow to be heard?
 - Why would the judge feel threatened by her?

Personal

- I'm part of a community that is commonly scapegoated by the Church and the state. I used to work for InterVarsity (Evangelical national campus ministry that is currently non-affirming of LGBTQ communities and fired everybody who is affirming). And as all that drama was beginning to unfold, my time on staff as a queer woman of color was spent on advocating, telling the stories, and pushing the institution to acknowledge, bring visibility to, and humanize LGBTQ students and staff in our organization, specifically those who were also racial minorities. And so I pushed and fought. I told not only my own stories of trauma but held the stories, pain, and resilience of LGBTQ students I was caring for in every single meeting, interaction, conference, etc. I learned to speak their language, play the Evangelical respectability politics that is supposed to get you heard, and in some situations I did feel really heard. But overall, I would say it was a traumatic and dismissive experience for me. I was told explicitly that these stories and these traumatized students don't really matter because they aren't the people who run InterVarsity. And that broke me.
- And so I look back at this widow, who no doubt has experienced her own traumas, and what I imagine it takes for her to retell her story over and over again to the judge to get justice for herself. And every time she tells it she's dismissed, rejected, and denied justice. She's not heard over and over again and her voice, her being, and her gifts essentially do not matter.
 - What is empowering this widow to keep pushing and keep speaking her truth? → survival, no other choice

Main point: Faith

7 "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Vs. 1: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up"

- Maybe, what is empowering this woman to keep pushing, is faith. Not faith in God. But faith that she is gonna be heard. Maybe faith that she already is heard.
- In my circles when I read this, it's a parable for community organizing and disruption and make noise until we see justice. And yes that's part of it, but Jesus says this is a parable to teach people how to pray. Jesus says this is a parable about finding faith, and he even wonders at the end will he find faith as powerful as this persistent widow?
- This is frankly really hard for me - as somebody who has been traumatized and victimized by individuals, by the church, by the state - it's not that I don't have faith in God, but I don't have faith that I'm gonna be heard. My MO has been push push push, and when I get a no, keep pushing because it's for the survival of myself and my communities. But every time we push, every time we engage, it's retriggering and retraumatizing. But we keep doing it because the communities we are carrying are in pain. But this is really hard, really unsustainable...
- What is empowering this widow to keep pushing and keep speaking her truth? What does it take for the widow to be heard?
 - I don't think the answer lies in the judge, or the institution, or even in the majority. If we look to be heard by those who have power over us, I think our energies are misdirected.
 - I think what fuels this woman is faith - faith not just in God, but faith that she is heard. She has faith that she is heard by her God, and if that's the truth then it doesn't matter when the system doesn't hear her and continues to reject her because the system doesn't have the power to validate her story. Her story and her voice are valid as they are because she's made in God's image. And that's where the faith lies.
 - During the really rough 2 years I had with InterVarsity, as I continued to feel silenced and mistrusted by the people who raised me in my faith, I just continued to hear from God, "do you trust that you are heard in the heavens?"
 - Because I didn't feel heard by people around me. And as an Asian American woman that feeling of being unheard is really familiar and fatiguing. And I really wasn't sure if God heard me either. As I continued to face rejection and exclusion as I did what I sensed the Holy Spirit was calling me to do, it all felt in vain a lot of the times.
 - But what kept me going was when God would just whisper to me: "Do you trust that you are heard in the heavens?" That your voice is beautiful, your story is valid, and it's worthwhile for you to speak. I think those of us who identify as women, as LGBTQ, as people of color, as immigrants with accents - we need to hear that truth so badly. That our voices are heard in the heavens and our stories are validated by God as they are.
 - And what empowered this woman to keep pushing and keep speaking her story was faith - faith that God heard and validated her struggle. That although the judge holds a lot of power, he nor the system holds the power to validate or invalidate her story. Even as the judge continues to reject her, her voice is valid because she's made in God's image.
 - This is significant having done a lot of unpacking of trauma and abuse, what victimization and scapegoating does to the victim it makes you feel crazy, it makes you question your own voice and your own judgment and sometimes even your own story. Did that really happen? Was it really that bad?

- But what we learn from this widow is the role of faith in the work of healing and the push for justice - faith that our validation and our affirmation comes from God.

So we answered the first two questions, but why does the judge feel threatened?

5: "yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!"

- This part shows us that persistence in speaking our truth does matter - even when the person in power doesn't fully hear you. For this widow, her truth is mirror that reflects back on his unjust practices and the system that's rigged against her that he's representing
 - When indigenous communities tell their stories - the horrific boarding schools, the displacement, the environmental racism to this day - it's not just their story, it's a reflection on Christianity and the U.S. And if we took their stories seriously, we would see that their stories are an indictment on the hypocrisy of Christianity and the genocidal violence of the nation.
 - This judge grants her justice because the more she tells her story the more it reflects back on an unjust system and an unjust judge. Telling her story makes the judge look bad that he still hasn't granted her justice. Telling the truth should have systemic implications because they expose the contradictions of our system.
- Because telling her story inspires others who have gone through the same thing
 - Child victims of sexual assault in the Catholic church - when one started speaking, everyone started speaking
 - Truth telling has communal implications and the potential mobilize an entire community
 - if a mob of widows were to pester this judge, how would that reflect back on him?

Right after this passage, Jesus tells **The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

I'm including this parable because it reveals the complexities of power.

Pharisees: religious officials, had power in the Jewish temple, confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else

Tax collectors: hated by Jews because they were literally collecting money for the corrupt occupying Roman empire, also had reputation of cheating people they collected from

This passage is so significant because both of these men have power, but their power depends on where you are socially. If we're in the temple, the tax collector is the excluded one, I would even argue scapegoated as the representative of the oppressive regime. If we're outside the temple in the Roman empire, the tax collector is really important to you, and the Pharisee, not so much, because they just represent the group you needed to keep oppressed in order to keep your system in place.

- As we talk about scapegoating and violence especially in our current political context - power is not so simple.
- Though I've experienced all this drama of feeling scapegoated and powerless from my experience with Evangelicalism, I am not without power but I hold a lot of power as someone who is upper middle class, educated, Christian, speaks English, etc. and I'm extremely susceptible to dehumanizing others and projecting my aggression and anger on people who don't deserve it.
- I was getting into all types of road rage and brawls after Trump got elected that frankly made me really uncomfortable with myself. It's true when they say hurt people hurt people. After one incident where I basically yelled at a man and his daughter I had to really check myself and I really grieved how this innocent family became victims of my projected aggression and anger.
- The way things are right now in our world, the way violence is done unto us and around us, we need to protect ourselves from getting caught up in this cycle of projected violence and scapegoating. And we need to recognize that power is so complex - that just as power is taken away from us in one context, we can turn around and take and abuse power in other contexts. We need God's grace and community members check us, to help us see our blind spots, and show us another way besides just inflicting pain on other people.
- For a lot of people, myself included, the "other way" is pursuing justice and activism. But I would also argue that some activists I know (MYSELF), have been some of the most angry and dehumanizing people I know. Anger is ok, anger is often cathartic and indignation is really useful, but turning anger into dehumanization is not ok. And yet this happens all the time among those of us who are deep in the justice work.
- As we turn to the passage we find something different - the tax collector's justification don't come from his actions, no matter how evil and selfish they were. His justification comes from taking a posture of humility, acknowledging that he's wronged people, and asking God to have mercy. Mercy and grace are what justify him.
- In a similar vein, I don't believe that it's our acts of justice that make us as okay people. Because we're all caught up in this system and we're all complicit somehow. I believe this passage is telling us that the posture of our hearts is what matters to God. A sense of humility, acknowledgement that we inflict violence no matter how hard we try not to, and admitting that we can be really ugly people given the right circumstances, this is the posture that brings us to need God and to need community. And this is the posture that keeps us at least aware of when we are acting in compliance with the cycle of violence and projection and scapegoating on innocent people. Liberation is not just institutional, it's interpersonal and internalized too.
- For those of us in this room who like you don't know God like that, or who feel like you don't even know how to come to God in this kind of way, or what it means to need God or even why you would need God. That's ok. When you read the passage, God isn't oppressive and forcing this tax collector to confess his sins. You see this man actually

coming to God on his own, in freedom, and having a really intimate moment with God. And it ends with God seeing, affirming, and justifying this man in the fullness of who he is - as someone who is excluded, someone who is imperfect, as someone who stole, but someone who is earnest. This is the character that Jesus chooses to honor and exalt in his parable.

Closing:

I titled this sermon "who tells your story?" - we have to not only be empowered in faith to tell our stories like the persistent widow, but from the second parable we see that we also have to take responsibility and be conscious of the type of story we are living and telling through our actions. But ultimately it's God's grace, God's gentleness, and God's affirmation of us and our stories that invite us to step out of the cycle of violence and into a new, alternative, healing, and sustainable way of living our lives and pursuing justice.

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