

DON'T GIVE UP!
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We are used to thinking of judges in the context of American democracy;
they are to be apolitical, impartial and, most especially, fair to all.

They tend to be part of the social and governmental elite in our society, aloof and unapproachable.
It's understandable why most Americans assume that, in this story, the judge represents God,
and that the widow represents pleading, begging, humanity trying desperately to get God's attention.
In the biblical context, and in my probably not very humble opinion,
this assumption is not just incorrect, it's catastrophically wrong.

The judge in that parable is nothing like God.

Jesus says that this judge did not fear God and did not respect other people.

Now I don't care what YOUR attitude toward God is,

do you really think that JESUS would ever have described God that way?

The behavior of that judge doesn't reflect the God described by Jeremiah or Paul, either.

Instead, consider: Who is it in life that doesn't take God seriously? Us, of course. Humanity.

And who doesn't respect people? Who doesn't care about others?

Again, humanity – of course.

The unjust judge in this parable represents sinful humanity.

As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry teaches, the best synonym for "sinful" is "selfish."

As we saw, the judge cared only about himself.

If the judge is the embodiment of human selfishness, who does the widow represent?

Well, what does she want? Justice – to make things right.

Time and again, the Bible says God is all about justice.

What is justice from God's perspective?

So often, in America, we use "justice" as a synonym for "revenge."

But that's not what Scripture means by the word.

In the Bible, the word "justice" means "Everything in the world is working exactly the way

God created it to work in the first place

without the devastation caused by sin, by human selfishness."

This story, along with the passage in Romans about the Holy Spirit praying in us,
and Jeremiah's promise of the enduring patience of God

is about how God prays in and to us, and doesn't lose heart, never gives up,

but keeps at it, through all the eons, cultures, and nationalistic drama,

from the dawn of time, to this time, and on to the end of time.

Jesus told the disciples about their need to be like the widow, that is, like GOD,

and pray continually and not be discouraged. In Greek, the word Jesus used for "discouraged"

is ἐκκακέω [eklakeō], which means, *I come out of badness*, or more clearly said:

"I'm losing heart." "I'm exhausted." "I'm utterly weary." "I want to give up."

When I read that line earlier this week, I was struck how, once again,
today's headlines are in this ancient book.

The world right now is absolutely stuffed with discouragement.

Today, there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions,

of exhausted people on this fragile earth, our island home.

Some are refugees, some live in war zones, some can't feed their kids;

some have adequate food and shelter, but have broken relationships,

terrible diseases, or pasts that continue to haunt their tomorrows.

There are even more people, probably most of us, who are doing OK now,
yet we have wounds that others can't see.

In an instant, the scars can ache anew when a sound, a sight, a smell,
a slam on the brakes, unseals a long-buried story of pain, regret, and injustice.

We all have our stories of how things are not just for us, not right.

What did the widow need? What do all of these people need? What do we need?

The first thing we all need is for someone to honor the truth of our story,
to listen carefully, without criticism or blame or defensiveness.

Finding that ear can seem impossible in today's world.

Before we even open our mouths, others have already decided we're unworthy,
we're despicable, we're not worth the space we take up on the planet.

What can we do in the face of the sheer meanness that fills our airwaves,
our roadways, our assemblies, and even our own hearts?

What can we do in a world where so many are crying *ἐκκακέω!*

"I am coming out of So. Much. badness! I just want to give up!"

What it will take for our world to turn from sin, from selfishness,
from this cesspool of badness, is one simple thing: Compassion.

Compassion literally means "to suffer with another," and it's God's M.O.
especially as witnessed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus:

God suffered and still suffers with us in order to reach us,
teach us and heal us and all creation, and turn the world around.

God calls us to join in this divine life by entering into a Cycle of Compassion.

We enter the Cycle by being honest about our suffering, our wounds, our hurts,
the badness we all come out of: the time we were bullied, when we felt different,
when we were rejected, when we were harassed, when we were lost in despair.

This idea of being this vulnerable may seem horrifying to many of us,
but there is one utterly safe person with whom we can be honest:

the One who has already searched our hearts and already knows our pain.

Look what it says in Romans: the Spirit comes to help our weakness,
pleading our case – our need for healing, wholeness, and holiness.

We are assured of this in the Collect for Purity that begins our worship service:

*Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires are known,
and from whom no secrets are hid . . . God won't be surprised by our story.*

Think of the person who has ever loved you the most: didn't you trust them?
isn't trusting them one of the ways you loved them?

Trusting God with our woundedness is an act of love by us.

The first step in the Cycle of Compassion is to admit to ourselves, and to trust God with,
our scars and our suffering, our need for divine healing,
and especially to acknowledge our secret wounds.

The second part of the Cycle of Compassion is to be compassionate with ourselves.

John O'Donohue, the late Irish poet and theologian, taught

that every person has qualities or presences in their heart that are awkward, disturbing, and negative.

Because God will heal us only with our permission, our sacred duty
is to work with God by exercising kindness toward ourselves,
to be a loving parent to our delinquent qualities.

Having compassion for ourselves is the only way
to enfold the qualities we dislike into an integrated, unique, wholeness.¹

¹ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. Harper Collins, 1997, p. 117

Only as we experience compassion from God and give it to ourselves,
we can enter the third part of the cycle: to love our neighbor *just as they are*.

To do that, we need to do something very simple, yet very difficult
in our polarized, judgmental, self-righteous culture: We need to listen.
We need to listen carefully to the story of someone different from us
without criticism or blame or defensiveness to understand their reality.

Not to agree, just to understand. There's a big difference.
When we understand another, we can value the wisdom of a Scottish pastor,
who said 120 years ago: "Be kind; everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."²
Seeking to understand others without judgment is completely countercultural;
our culture teaches us to criticize, blame, and persuade,
to fix others so that they are acceptable to us.

Or, simply to ignore and dismiss those who bother us,
as the unjust judge did to the widow.

This is not what God did when God walked among us.

God in Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, listened to others with an open heart,
especially to those who were on the margins: the sick, the naked, the poor,
the prisoners, the foreigners, the refugees, the widows, the oppressed,
the little children: the ones who have had more than their fair share
of crying out "έκκακέω!" "I give up!"

Jesus calls his followers, his brothers and sisters, to conform to his image
and do the same for those we meet, especially those on the margins.

When we stop to see the wounds and have compassion without judgment, new life can emerge.

When we respect the hard battle each person is fighting – including our own –
the transforming power of the Cycle of Compassion can change everything;
it can turn the world from sin to hope.

Yes, practicing compassion is hard, countercultural work, so, it's obvious why we need to pray continually:
to stay connected to God's Holy Spirit so we will never become discouraged,
never cry "έκκακέω!", never give up.

It's in our prayer, in our willing openness to God's presence in our daily reality,
where God can engrave our hearts to be like God's,
it is how God will let the fires of justice to burn within us,
until we shout with joy as the world turns one last time,
turns away from sin and selfishness to hope and healing,
and the Day of the Lord dawns on us all.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

O Lord God, tireless guardian of your people, you are always ready to hear our cries. Teach us to rely day and night on your care. Inspire us to seek your enduring justice for all this suffering world, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

² <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/06/29/be-kind/>

JEREMIAH 31:27-34

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will plant seeds in Israel and Judah, and both people and animals will spring up. Just as I watched over them to dig up and pull down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and plant, declares the Lord. In those days, people will no longer say:

Sour grapes eaten by parents leave a bitter taste in the mouths of their children. Because everyone will die for their own sins: whoever eats sour grapes will have a bitter taste in their own mouths.

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the Lord. No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the Lord!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

PSALM 119:97-104

You are to be praised, O God, in Zion; to you shall vows be performed in Jerusalem.

To you that hear prayer shall all flesh come, because of their transgressions.

Our sins are stronger than we are, but you will blot them out.

Happy are they whom you choose and draw to your courts to dwell there!

they will be satisfied by the beauty of your house, by the holiness of your temple.

Awesome things will you show us in your righteousness, O God of our salvation,

O Hope of all the ends of the earth and of the seas that are far away.

You make fast the mountains by your power; they are girded about with might.

You still the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the clamor of the peoples.

Arise, O God, and rule the earth, for you shall take all nations for your own.

You visit the earth and water it abundantly; you make it very plenteous; the river of God is full of water.

You prepare the grain, for so you provide for the earth.

You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges; with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its increase.

You crown the year with your goodness, and your paths overflow with plenty.

May the fields of the wilderness be rich for grazing, and the hills be clothed with joy.

**May the meadows cover themselves with flocks, and the valleys cloak themselves with grain;
let them shout for joy and sing.**

ROMANS 8:26-29

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will.

We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. We know this because God knew them in advance, and he decided in advance that they would be conformed to the image of his Son. That way his Son would be the first of many brothers and sisters.

LUKE 18:1-8

Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, 'Give me justice in this case against my adversary.' For a while he refused but finally said to himself, 'I don't fear God or respect people, but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her coming here and embarrassing me.' The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?"

SERMON HYMN: *Canticle of the Turning*

BLESSING: The Wisdom of God, the Love of God, and the Grace of God strengthen you to be Christ's hands and heart in this world, as you go from here blessed in the name of the Holy Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.