

"Finding God in Our Lives" based on Luke 18:1-8
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
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Page 1 of 6

The widow's persistence before the uncaring judge represents the divine continually calling our attention to the needs of justice and the presence of grace.

Let's remember that parables – sacred stories – help us explore our lives.
It is not that there is one interpretation.
There can be many.

There is a traditional understanding
that if persistence is enough
to cause an irreverent and unjust judge to be fair -
how much more will a loving God answer prayer.

What came to me as I contemplated this story was to ask,
"Where does God show up in the story?"

How is the divine active here?

Well – that's not hard.
The divine is the widow – the one seeking justice -
the nagging voice calling the listener
to something that needs attention.

Have you ever felt a nagging -
to step out of your comfort zone
and defend an injustice -
but wondered if you could make a difference?

Maybe you didn't know how to go about it.
And besides that – it could get messy.

We can become like the judge in the story.
He only relented when the pressure increased.

He only relented when the issue before him
might have some impact on him.

I think about how many times
I could have championed a cause - but I was too busy.
After all – there are so many causes.



I remember one thing that happened when I was a child.

We were in Dallas – as we went there to shop for school clothes.
That was always fun.
We got on a bus downtown.
I remember stepping up into the bus.

There were several African Americans
stepping up in to the bus also.
My mother told me
that they would be sitting in the back of the bus.

I asked why.
She told me to lower my voice – or be quiet or something like that.

I did not lower my voice.

I didn't see why it would matter where anybody sat
in public transportation.
I was learning about racism - discrimination related to the color of one's skin.
I think we ended up sitting at the back of the bus.

I caused a little trouble on that bus ride.
It did not match what I had learned at Central Methodist Church.
I did not understand.
I was not going to let it alone.

My mother was a kind person
but not a person who would make a scene
or do anything to disturb the status quo – usually.
I could not understand
why she would put up with this.

But I have also known that so many people have to endure injustices.
Until all people are valued - in ways that count.
When I was a child it was color of skin
that gave people a reason to say
one was more worthy than the other.

This week in the news
we still are saying one is more valuable than another
over sexual orientation.
"Don't ask - Don't tell" – in the US military.

As if sexual orientation affects
loyalty, skill, camaraderie, ability to defend our country.

I tell how it does affect it.
It affects it if individuals in the military
need someone else to devalue -
just like anywhere else.

We human beings just seem to have a need
to measure value -

not so much by the fruits of one's life
but other descriptive characteristics.

In many places in the world it is still gender.
In some places it is nationality or religion.



Who stands up for justice?
The widow stands up for justice.
Capable people sometimes stand aside.



How does it happen that there seems to be an epidemic
of bullying in schools?

Where do children learn that it is okay
to taunt other children?
They learn it at home and they learn it from their friends.
They learn it from the media.
They learn it in the marketplace.
They have been learning it from the military
and tragically they have often learned it from the church.

How many suicides does it take?

The widow continues to speak.



This is not to say that we don't work
at changing the atmosphere in schools -
in communities - and even in churches -
because we do.



Right now - are making an effort right here.
We are trying to establish a children's education outreach.
If we don't have enough students this year -
we will try again next year.

Take a look at the artwork downstairs -
for the children's program -
and think about the messages
that are important for children to learn -
even here in Aspen.

We want parents to see them too.
We want them to consider the church
as a place of learning
how to live fully and freely.

Let people know about it.
Let us be about giving children a message of hope
so they are much less likely
to fall into the kinds of attitudes
that lead to devaluing – to taunting – to bullying.

Does anyone remember *The Hound of Heaven*?
The Hound of Heaven is a poem
written by an English author named Francis Thompson in the 1870's.
The poem is about how God pursues us
even though we attempt to elude God – deny God -
something like our widow today.

The poem is 182 lines but a few of the lines go like this:
Remember the language in from the 1870's
and God is "Him"
and I am going to leave it that way.

The poet describes his life as running from God.

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years...
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind;
and in the mist of tears...I hid from Him....

I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years —
My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.
My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,
Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.
Yea, faileth now even dream. . . .
And now my heart is as a broken fount
Wherein tear-drippings stagnate . . .

One night in 1917 Dorothy Day as a young journalist
heard Eugene O'Neill reciting this poem
in a darkened bar called the Hell Hole
in Greenwich Village in New York.

She thought it was a kind of spiritual autobiography for O'Neill.
It was about his disillusionment
with his parents' Catholic faith.
He had been claiming what she called an anguished atheism.

She did not see him again for many years.
He went on to win four Pulitzers
and the Nobel Prize in literature - but not happiness.

His plays were studies in loss and of a God who failed to deliver.

She wrote later of herself as, like him, a lonely idealist
with a taste for rye whiskey and lover-done-me-wrong songs.

Dorothy Day's life continued on a downward spiral
with disappointments and lost love.

Then in December 1927, a decade after listening
to O'Neill recite this poem in that darkened bar -
she recalled herself surrendering to the relentless
"Hound of Heaven"
and entered a church.

Dorothy Day spent her life until she died in 1980
not far from the Hell Hole bar.
She lived with little income or security -
sheltering the homeless -
and speaking out against injustice -
and becoming the Dorothy Day
we know in Christian history
in this nation.

In her writings she shared
the radical belief - in "the merciful kingdom of God."

Now that again is language of the past for God.
But - surely you get the idea of the divine
in its pursuit of Dorothy Day.

In her first autobiography she called it
a poem that awakens the soul.

In his poem, Francis Thompson calls God
"this tremendous Lover."
God is out to get us.

God hounds our days and hounds our nights.
God knows what we need even before we ask.
God knows that what we are doing in our lives
is searching for the divine.

This is the God Dorothy Day found -
or let find her.¹



This is like the divine
showing up as the widow in our story today.

Only today – it's not the widow in pursuit of an inheritance
that was rightly hers.

Today it is an inheritance that is due all persons -
to be valued and respected
in any situations where bias and bigotry remain.

It's important to keep an ear open to the widow.
She calls our attention to the needs of justice.

Wherever you see vulnerable persons
for whom and for whatever reason justice wants to pass them by -
remember the nagging widow.

That is where God will be in our lives.

Or remember "The Hound of Heaven"
and let that represent the widow
in pursuit of the judge.

But let it also represent something else.

God is that which frees you to be all you are
and sometimes it takes a lot of hounding to learn that.

So – on behalf of our widow and judge
may heaven continue to hound us -

and may heaven hound us into
being the persons the divine has in mind.

Amen.

¹ Adapted from an article by David Scott entitled "God, the Hound of Heaven"