

Unsympathetic characters (Luke 18:1-8)

This is a troubling parable.

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October 18, 2019

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Out of respect, the widow in Jesus' parable is most often referred to as "persistent" or "tenacious." We imagine her as a feeble old lady hobbling behind the judge on her foldable walker, shaking a bony finger at his backside: "You listen to me, young man!"

But if the judge is to be believed, she is neither feeble nor hobbling. She is pugnacious.

The judge confesses to his colleagues his fear of being beaten by this seemingly innocent widow. Though my biblical Greek is as rickety as a feeble old lady's knees, reliable sources tell me that what the NRSV translates as "wear me out," (*hypopiahdzo*) can also be legitimately rendered, "hit me under the eye" or "give me a black eye" or "get in my face." In fact, to fall a little farther down the rabbit hole, that Greek word is used only twice in the New Testament: here and in 1 Corinthians 9:27, where Paul describes himself "boxing as though beating the air."

How does the trajectory of the parable shift when the widow is viewed not as a withered woe-is-me but as a pugilistic antagonist?

And what are we to make of the judge? A self-proclaimed godless misanthrope, the judge grants the widow's plea anyway. Why? Out of fear? Weariness? Self-protection?

Because neither of these characters is truly sympathetic, the path from the parable to Jesus' interpretation is tortured. Taken literally, Jesus first seems to support the widow's aggression, casting the judge as an irritable curmudgeon. But in the next breath, Jesus casts the judge in a kinder light, using him as a model for God's own granting of justice.

This is a troubling parable.

Some might regard the widow as a model of persistence in prayer. But she goes to an extreme, being perceived by the judge as not only persistent but aggressive and maybe even dangerous. Are we to similarly push God around until God says, arms raised in self-defense, "Alright, alright. I'll give you what you want. Just don't hurt me!"

It is also unsettling to imagine the judge as an avatar for Jesus. How loud must we yell, how hard must we push, how aggressive must we be to get God's attention when we cry out?

Sunday is coming, and soon we must come to terms with the unsavory characters who, to Jesus' mind, carry great parabolic weight. At this moment, before stepping into the pulpit, I will refer to them only as "Exhibit A" and "Exhibit B." We'll let the judge decide.