

Proper 24, Year C
Luke 18: 1-8
October 21, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

The Widow at the Gate:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

I can't get that widow out of my head. Day after day she goes to the city gates, the place where justice is dispensed. Day after day she positions herself in the crowd of petitioners—perhaps at first coming late and standing near the back, waiting for others to make their claims, waiting for her time to come. I suspect at first hers was a patient plea in measured tones—"Hear my case, grant me justice"—but the judge didn't hear her. She was just a widow, an insignificant one, and he had bigger fish to fry.

I wonder what keeps her coming back. I wonder how she summons up the courage to return again and again to the gates where justice is supposed to be dispensed.

Perhaps it is that she is desperate—a woman, a widow, with no one to help her, with no man to plead her case. Think of it—think of how many lines she oversteps as she makes her cry for justice. She has no choice—she has to get the judge to hear her plea—her life depends on it.

But I wonder if there are other things that fuel her cry for judgment, her call for justice. Could it be that inscribed on her heart is God's promise to her people—a promise to be the protector of widows? Could it be that God's law is written on that widow's heart? Could it be that she looked deep within her heart and remembered God's many laws protecting the widow, the stranger and the orphan? Could it be that her faith in the promise of God is stronger than her fear of the ridicule and rebuffs she daily faces as she cried out for justice? That widow is emboldened by the law written on her heart!

And what about the judge? What do you suppose was written on his heart? I wonder if at one time in his life—maybe early on—there at the center of his heart, the same promises and laws had been inscribed. What do you suppose hardens his heart? What leads him to turn a deaf ear to the widow standing before him? What makes him

turn away from God's call for justice for the stranger, the orphan and the widow within the city gates.

Maybe he is preoccupied with weightier questions. Maybe there are "important people" waiting to be heard. Perhaps he just didn't want to see that widow—to be confronted with the problem.

Folks often turn away from truths that challenge their notions of how things are. Or is it lust for power that hardens his heart? Perhaps he threw in his lot with those who line their pockets at the expense of the friendless and the poor. Perhaps he took a bribe. The law is clear. Widows are to be protected. Their pleas need to be heard.

But still that judge turns a deaf ear to the widow's cries for justice. I can imagine her cries got louder every day. I can picture her elbowing her way to the front of the crowd. Defying all convention. Looking the judge in the eye and demanding justice. Scripture tells us she was relentless. No wonder he gives in. No wonder he relents. No wonder he finally grants her plea for justice against her opponent.

There are those who hear in this story of a desperate widow and a lawless judge a call to persistence in prayer. I think that's part of it. But there's more to this parable of the widow and the judge. This is a parable about prayer and faith, about justice—justice demanded and justice delivered. This is a parable that offers us an invitation and a choice—an invitation to a different way of prayer and a choice to join a widow standing before a judge.

Remember the request Jesus' disciples make—"Lord, teach us to pray." Remember how he responds with the prayer we know almost too well. "Thy kingdom come." "Give us this day our daily bread." "Forgive us our debts..." "Lead us not into temptation." "Deliver us from evil." Think of it—Jesus first teaches his disciples to pray for others as well as themselves..."Give us", "Forgive us", "Lead us", "Deliver us".

Later we hear the parable of the ten lepers. Remember, ten were healed but only one turns back in praise and thanksgiving. Through that parable, Jesus teaches his disciples—Jesus teaches us—to offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving.

Today we hear Jesus teach his disciples another form of prayer—the call for justice as a form of prayer. Isn't that what the widow was doing when she confronted the unjust judge with her cries for justice?

Isn't her call for justice a form of prayer? Think of it—when we join the widows, the orphans, the hungry, the homeless, the abused in cries for justice, we are offering a prayer to God. Think of it—when we stand in solidarity with refugees, victims of violence, the overlooked and the marginalized, we are offering a prayer to God. Think of it—when we lift our voices for those our society overlooks or pushes aside or forgets, we are offering a prayer to God.

An amazing part of any form of prayer is its capacity to change the one praying. Perhaps you've noticed this. Perhaps you've noticed that as you pray that slowly, over time, you begin to change. To put it another way—you begin to work for the change for which you are praying. Cries for justice become acts of faith—faith that God's reign of justice, mercy and loving kindness will break through the darkness, greed and indifference to the plight of the powerless that so often mark our world; faith that fuels cries of justice and acts of compassion; faith that brings a widow back to the city gates day after day until her call for justice is heard.

So often we think of faith as belief in a proposition. But there's more to faith than just belief. There's an action element to faith. At least to the faith the widow teaches us. Remember how she returns again and again. She holds in her heart a vision of how things ought to be. And she takes steps to make it happen. Cries for justice and persistence in prayer are acts of faith, acts of faith that give birth to God's future here with us, acts of faith that believe the future into being.

"Will the Son of Man find faith when he returns?" The answer is up to us.