

“The Nudnik Widow”

Sunday, October 17, 2010: Luke 18:1-8

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The squeaky wheel gets oiled. Have you ever heard that saying? The squeaky wheel refers to a person who complains incessantly until they get the attention they need or the thing they want. We all know people like that. Some of us admire squeaky wheels for their persistence in obtaining what they need. Those of us who are introverts or hopelessly polite Episcopalians may even be a bit envious of their ability to advocate on their own behalf. Others find squeaky wheels to be whining nuisances who with their constant harping get on our last good nerve.

This is precisely what we encounter in the parable of The Unjust Judge in the Gospel of Luke today; a squeaky wheel and someone who thought she was a royal nuisance. Despite its title this parable does not describe any judges in the Cleveland Municipal Court system . . . although it could! Rather the story tells of a judge in first century Palestine who, “neither feared God nor had any respect for people.” This is a guy who neither the American Bar Association nor the religious establishment is going to be very enthusiastic about.

The description of the judge’s bad attitude toward both religion and his constituents is hyperbole; Jesus is portraying this image of an extremist judge as a linguistic foil to underscore the message of the parable.

You see judges were charged with specifically look out for the concerns of the vulnerable and needy. In the court of law the judge’s role was to be a protector of the downtrodden and the oppressed. In Jewish society the Law and the message of the prophets defined a judge’s role. So to have this judge in the parable thumbing his nose at both God and at people he is meant to serve is appalling!

The second character in the story is the widow. Of all the classes of people considered needy and imperiled in Jesus’ day widows were number one. Widows were not only people who had lost their husbands, but their social standing in the community as well. Like the Prodigal Son a widow was in many ways dead to her society. This one has moxie though. She is clearly not willing to be a victim of others preying upon her. This widow is fighting for her rights. She is probably trying to get the judge to defend her against some scam artist who had financially taken advantage of her or someone who threatens her precarious toehold on independence.

She is a scrapper. In Yiddish she would be called a nudnik; a person who is very annoying, a persistent nag and a pest. The scripture says that she “kept on coming [to the judge] with her plea” looking for justice against her opponent. Initially the judge refuses her requests. This is no surprise, as he has no respect for her. Yet she keeps at it. Finally her efforts pay off; the judge relents. He gets worn down and becomes so bothered by her that he throws up his hands in exasperation and grants the widow the justice she is seeking. She is proof positive that the squeaky wheel does in deed get oiled.

Like all parables this one is rich in meaning. But here is the one I want to focus on; it is the meaning Jesus presents to his listeners: “Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?” Jesus asks. “Will he delay in helping them? I tell you he will quickly grant justice to them.” In other words if this unethical judge ultimately grants justice to the pleas of a vulnerable widow, how much more will God – who is justice itself - grant justice to those of us who ask it.

This past Tuesday U.S. District Judge Virginia Phillips' issued an injunction to the U.S. military to immediately stop enforcing the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy against gay and lesbian members of the armed services. Her order effectively suspends the ban against openly gay people in the military. Now Virginia Phillips is not an unjust judge, if anything she is the exact opposite. But there have been many unethical judges involved in the saga of don’t ask, don’t tell. The unjust judges in the military, the U.S. Senate, the White House, the religious right and various courts who have all upheld this discriminatory and unjust policy for seventeen years.

Going up against these unjust judges have been a slew of nudnik widows who have persistently challenged the injustice of not allowing gay men and women to openly and honorably serve this nation. These nudnik widows have been gay and straight, liberal and conservative, men and women. Many in our country have viewed these widows as persistent, annoying pests as they repeatedly

challenged the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. They certainly had their share of refusals. Yet like the widow in the parable these widows were undaunted. In their heart of hearts they knew they were on the side of righteousness and that they would, in God’s time, prevail. As of this week the squeaky wheel has been oiled; finally!

Of course I suspect we are not done with judges, just or unjust. Judge Phillips’ decision may be appealed and if so it is off to the U.S Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit. Her decision might stand there or it could be reversed. In all likelihood we will see this case wend its way to the Supreme Court. The work of the nudnik widows is not done.

Some people might believe that as in the parable, the nudnik widows of don’t ask, don’t tell wore down the system. And the system, like the unjust judge in the parable, caved in to their demands so that it could get a little peace of mind.

But the truth needs to be viewed in its greater context: and that is that God’s justice will ultimately prevail in all of the creation, despite the best efforts of unjust judges to prevent it from doing so. Make no mistake about it; obtaining the full civil rights of gay and lesbian people is part and parcel of building up God’s justice in the world. The parable concludes with Jesus calling us to pray unceasingly for God’s justice to prevail. This call to prayer is especially poignant when we consider that this judicial overturning of don’t ask, don’t tell comes as our awareness is heightening of just how much bigotry against gays and lesbians in the form of bullying infects our culture.

This awareness has dawned on the American conscience when Rutgers student Tyler Clementi who leaped off the George Washington Bridge to his death two weeks ago. Clementi was bullied to the point of death because he was gay by two fellow students. His tragic death has encouraged many who suffer the injustice of bullying to step forward and tell their stories.

This new awareness of the pain so many suffer from this injustice has been the catalyst for a new YouTube video series that has going viral on the Internet this week. It is called “It Gets Better.” “It Gets Better” features a number of well-known people presenting a message of hope to young gay and lesbian people who live in isolated, lonely, frightening and potentially violent circumstances. The Internet becomes a critical vehicle of reaching out to these young people who may not have other person or a support group available to help them deal with bullying and hatred. My favorite “It Gets Better” is the one by Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire.

Speaking against religious traditions that hold gays to be intrinsically disordered or condemned to hell, Bishop Robinson tells his listeners that these religions are flat out wrong. “You can have the life that you hope for,” he says, “because God hopes for that life for you.” “It Gets Better” is our new nudnik widow. Coming up against injustice it clamors for justice for all people.

To be a Christian is to be called to being a nudnik widow. We are called to bother the hell out of those unjust judges in the world who perpetrate injustice in all of its egregious form.

In our gradual hymn today the second verse reads, “and day by day [the widow] spoke for justice, and word by word injustice waned. That is what God calls us to do as well; word by word speak for justice. How can we do so? Let’s start by sending these YouTube “It Gets Better” links to every body we know and ask them to pass it on to everyone they know. And do not just send them to your friends; let’s send the links to the emails of the unjust judges we know of in the world: the White House, the Supreme Court, our Senators who waver on supporting justice, the heads of those churches that preach intolerance and hate. A slew of “It Gets Better” email links in their inboxes ought to get their attention and annoy the heck out of them! Nudnik widows advocating for God’s justice in the world become true followers of Jesus, not just a bunch of folks who sit around in church idolizing him. Word by word we can make a difference and see injustice wane. Is there any better reason to be a squeaky wheel?

Amen