

A Parable of Unreturned Calls

Luke 18:1-8

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

September 25, 2011

Here is a contemporary telling of Jesus' parable:

Once there was a woman who worked in a warehouse. She was really an artist, but she had been unemployed for some time, so she took a job in a warehouse, lifting boxes of books in the middle of the night. One night the woman lifted a really heavy box—heavier than it was supposed to be—and turned her head just so and felt something snap in her neck. Because the warehouse had just started running a graveyard shift, there was no safety officer present as required, so no one knew what to do. Eventually the woman called her husband and got him out of bed and asked him to take her to the emergency room.

The woman turned out to have a serious injury. The pain did not go away. For about a month, the warehouse told her she had to come back to work and just sit in a room for eight hours because they didn't want to pay worker's comp. Eventually she got sick pay and was allowed to stay home, but the pain never went away. After a year of trying every kind of treatment and therapy, the worker's comp company agreed to surgery on her neck.

Soon after that, the woman moved to another state. The worker's comp company assigned a person to go to the doctor with the woman to see what was going on. She went to a series of top specialists, and after a year of this they all decided that there was nothing more that could be done for her. The worker's comp company sent her to a pain specialist just to manage her pain.

That doctor refused to accept the idea that the woman's pain had to last forever. He wanted to help her get better. But the worker's comp company was not happy about this. They refused to pay for first one thing and then another, refusing to return calls, but finally—on the three-year anniversary of the injury—they agreed to a nerve block in order to see if disabling one particular nerve would take the pain away. Wonder of wonders, it worked! So the doctor asked the worker's comp company to approve the next step—removing the nerve altogether by zapping it with radio waves.

But the worker's comp company was not interested in seeing the woman get better. They were only interested in saving money. They had agreed to the nerve block in a weak moment. So they denied the request to remove the nerve and end the pain. The doctor's office kept calling to discuss the denial, but the calls were never returned. The woman kept calling, but the calls were never returned; in fact, no one had returned a single one of her calls for the past year. A lawyer called, and the calls were never returned. The woman's husband called when the woman had to go to the hospital, and the call was not returned. Two doctors at the hospital said, "Sue!" The social worker said, "Sue!" But how hard would it be to sue someone in another state who never returns calls?

You see, the woman really had no leverage. She had no friends in high places. She had no money to pay for the medical procedure. She only had one thing—a phone number for the person who would not return calls. So she kept calling. And calling. And calling. And one day the pain doctor called the woman and said, "Guess what! They approved the procedure!" It was not because the workers comp company suddenly cared about the woman. It was not because they had a sudden attack of ethics. It was because all those calls wore the case manager down, like

Chinese water torture, and she finally thought to herself, “If I don’t give this woman what she’s asking for, she’s going to drive me crazy.”

“So,” Jesus said, “if even that uncaring, stingy worker’s comp company finally granted the request of this helpless woman, how can you think that God will not answer your prayers? God loves you! God cares about justice! God is not going to leave you hanging by not returning your calls. But here’s the question I want you to think about—not whether God will return your call, but this question: when things take a long time to be made right, will you have the faith to keep calling? When you don’t get relief right away, will you still trust in God?”

Since we come across this story in the New Testament—and because Luke attached a label saying the story is about persistence in prayer—we want to jump right to the interpretation of the parable that compares the worker’s comp company, or the unjust judge, to God. Every preacher has to make clear that God is *not* like the bad guy in the story. God is *not* someone you have to wear down by sheer obnoxiousness because he basically does not want to help you. The point of the story is quite the opposite. If even the uncaring worker’s comp company or the uncaring judge will eventually grant a request because of persistence, how much more will a God who loves you and wants the best for you grant your request for justice.

But before we jump to the interpretation of the story, we need to focus on the story itself. Jesus is not, after all, telling a fairy tale. This story is probably “ripped from the headlines.” Did you hear about the widow who was having her house condemned by a rich developer who finally got justice because the widow was driving the judge crazy? Jesus is talking mostly to peasants—and to religious leaders who ought to be on their side. He is talking about the *realpolitik* of his world. The poor had no power in that society—no vote, no unions, no media. We are nervous about mentioning class warfare today, but Jesus accepts that as the reality of the world. Jesus quotes a popular saying of his day that Billie Holiday paraphrased as “Them that’s got shall get, them that’s not shall lose.” The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This is not news. The poor get poorer because they have no power. That’s why in Luke’s gospel—the same one this story is in—Jesus goes through a whole list of curses on the rich and blessings on the poor. And this widow is the least powerful of all.

A widow is a woman without a man. Jesus’ world wasn’t that different than some radical Muslim societies today, like Afghanistan under the Taliban. A woman was not supposed to leave her house without a man. A woman was not supposed to speak to a man in public unless it was her husband or her son. A woman was not allowed to testify in court. A woman could not appear before a judge. So the only power this widow had—with no man to go to bat for her—was to scream at the judge as he walked down the street.

I think Jesus is saying, “Good for this woman!” She used the only power she had to get what she needed. She made herself obnoxious. She yelled and screamed until someone listened. In this world, Jesus is saying, the squeaky wheel does get the grease. Don’t just sit down and be polite. Holler until somebody helps you.

Jesus presupposes that there are people in power in this world who are selfish and godless—a truth we have to hold in tension with the idea from Romans 13 that all authorities are placed there by God. Sometimes the authorities really don’t care. Sometimes they simply ignore you and refuse to return your calls. I think of the lawyers who routinely ignore Dave Roosa when he calls about custody and child support. I think of the mental health providers who kept ignoring the pleas of the Campbell family when they tried to get help for Ross. I think of one of our local boards who refused for six months to answer a letter from the state advocate for the mentally ill, and then refused to meet with him. I’m not saying that any of those authorities is

selfish and godless like the judge in the parable, but certainly Jesus is not one who would say that the oppressed of this world should just shut up and stop rocking the boat. He uses this practical example of one person who says like Peter Finch in *Network*, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore."

The focus of the parable, it seems to me now, is not so much on the contrast between the evil judge and our good God as it is on the widow herself. She's called out for two traits. Before the story, Luke mentions her persistence. After the story, Jesus mentions her faith. She never gives up and she keeps on believing.

Jesus promises that God will give justice to those who cry out to him day and night, who want justice so badly that they hunger and thirst for it. In his commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock tells about a meeting during the civil rights struggle where they were talking about dreams deferred and justice denied. An elderly black minister read this parable and gave a one-sentence interpretation: "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is."

When Jesus says "Ask and you shall receive," he uses the present tense of the verb which usually means continuous action—"Keep on asking, and you shall receive. Keep on knocking, and the door shall be opened. Keep on seeking, and you shall find." Don't give up when it doesn't happen immediately. Faith is not just believing that something will happen magically; faith is believing that in God's good time God will make things right.

There is a wonderful story about Mother Teresa's ability to ask—one I might recommend to anyone working on a capital fund drive. She once paid a visit to Edward Bennett Williams, a very big deal Washington lawyer—Richard Nixon's lawyer, Frank Sinatra's lawyer, a behind-the-scenes power broker, owner of the Redskins and the Orioles. Mother Teresa was raising money for an AIDS hospice and Williams was in charge of a small charitable foundation. Williams told the other officer of the foundation, "AIDS is not my favorite disease and I really don't want to give to this, but I have this saint coming to see me. I don't know what to do." They agreed that they would hear her out but would not give any money.

Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no." Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." Williams and his partner bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, "All right, all right, get me my checkbook!"

Be that persistent, Jesus is saying—with the authorities and with God himself. Keep praying and keep asking and justice will come. If even Nixon's lawyer will give to AIDS because of the persistence of a little old lady, how much more will your father in heaven give you the justice you are seeking.

This is where persistence depends on faith. Who is it that we are asking when we pray? Is it someone who is indifferent to us or someone who has shown himself to be irrevocably on our side by what he did on the cross of Jesus Christ? Does Jesus teach us to pray to our heavenly judge or to pray to our heavenly Father?

Tom Long, who used to teach preaching at Princeton Seminary, tells an old story about a young boy named Frank who was walking along the bank of the Mississippi River and noticed another boy about his age wrestling with a homemade raft. He said to him, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm going to take this raft out to that island in the middle of the river. I dare you to go with me!" Well, Frank couldn't resist the dare so he got onto the raft. The boys headed

out to the middle of the river but the current was strong. As they approached the island, the raft broke up and sank and they had to swim to the island. There they were, abandoned on an island, late in the afternoon. Nobody knew where they were.

Right at that moment, one of those paddle-wheel steamers came down the river and Frank ran to the edge of the island and began screaming and waving his hands, "Help! Help!" The other boy said, "Don't waste your breath. They can't hear you and even if they could they wouldn't pay any attention to boys like us." But just at that moment the steamer turned toward the island. The boy said to Frank, "How did you do that?" Frank said, "Well, there's something you don't know. The captain of that boat is my father!"

Who is the captain of the universe? Who is it that we are asking to rescue us? That's the question that faith has to answer.