

**Of Promise and Prayer, Justice and Faith**  
**Commitment Sunday – Oct. 16, 2016**  
**Caldwell Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. John M. Cleghorn**

Mr. Jaquith was my geometry teacher in 10th grade. Was an ex-Marine, if there is such a thing as an ex-Marine, broad shouldered, full-framed and about 6 foot 3. Needless to say, he was well suited to manage the bunch of knuckleheads that was my class.

Geometry was NOT my friend. Its vagaries escaped me. I couldn't tell the difference between a rhombus and a regular hexahedron, a cuboid from a Cartesian plane. But in the end, I passed, barely.

One geometric concept I did retain, however, is the idea of a **parabola**. A parabola, you may remember is a curved line that refers back to one point. If a parabola is made in 3 dimensions with reflective material, it reflects light to a central point of focus. What does this have to do with worship, you ask?

I remember what a parabola is because it hearkens a similar word, parable. Jesus, of course, told parables, as with the one we heard a moment ago. Jesus taught in many ways. Sometimes, he taught with direct action, as when he threw the money changers off the temple grounds. Other times, Jesus wanted his listeners to think, to try to find themselves in the story. He did that through parables.

Sort of like a curved line that reflects light back to a central point of focus, parables point to the big truths of our faith. Most often, Jesus used parables to describe the kingdom of God and where we fit in it. So it was last week when we considered the parable of the talents. So it is this week with the parable of the widow and the unjust judge.

Jesus told his followers there was in a city an unjust judge, who neither feared God nor liked people. There was also a widow, who kept asking the unjust judge for help with her unnamed adversary. The widow didn't give up. She asked and asked and asked for justice until the unjust judge gave in and intervened on her behalf. He gave her the justice she so tirelessly sought.

Then Jesus compared the judge to God, promising that, unlike the unjust judge, God quickly answers those who call on divine help. Then in typical Jesus style, he asked a question, "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

What started out as a story about prayer turned into a lesson in persistence, then a call for justice before ending up with encouragement to pray always.

Like a parabola, this parable winds around its point. It calls us to inquire as to its central truth.

As the disciples often did, our first instinct may be to think about the characters in the story.

Let's start with the widow. Jesus' first hearers knew that widows held a clear place in society in their day. Widows were next to helpless in their male-dominated culture. Without a husband to earn a living, widows depended on the broader community to live. This was the social contract, the social safety net, of the day – that the covenant community would reach down and pull up those who fell behind.

Then there is the judge. In Christ's day, and going back centuries before, judges were appointed to settle disputes. Heads of families or the elders of a tribe often held the position. In those days, there was no structured judicial system as we have, no Federal, State and local courts. No elections for judges, as we have coming up. Scripture leaves no clues as to how the unjust judge got appointed, who he knew or what qualifications he had.

What we do know is that this judge was one hard-hearted fellow. To deny a widow – seemingly out of pure spite – would be an obvious breach of office, an abuse of power over one of the most vulnerable members of society.

But however hard-hearted the judge was, the widow was even more persistent. She wore the judge down, until he used his power, privilege and station in the community to bring about justice against her adversary. She had grit.

The parable doesn't tell us why the judge finally broke down. One Biblical scholar offers the theory, if the judge had never done anything to help, the custom of the day would have been for the widow to slap the judge in the face. So maybe the judge just wanted to avoid an embarrassing slap in the face.

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We can't say the same for our city. We can't say our city avoided a slap in the face over an issue of justice denied.

As with the widow, a segment of our fair city had been asking for help, asking for justice, asking for fair treatment. And like the widow, their patience finally boiled over.

For five days hundreds of our neighbors marched the streets with all of the world watching on the cable news networks. It was a slap in the face all right, a wake-up call, especially for those who focus more on the image of our city than the needs of all of its residents.

Their cry for justice had the needed effect. Our city is paying attention all of a sudden. But we must confess, that for too long our most vulnerable neighbors were treated like the persistent widow, asking and asking to be heard, asking for justice from judges of our town. We should have seen it coming. We should have been listening. We should have been hearing their cries. Twenty years ago, after all, a Harvard University study on social capital found Charlotte to have the least interracial trust among the nation's major cities.

Yes, we should have seen it coming.

In the years afterward, several other national studies revealed profound economic inequality and protracted, deeply racialized poverty that had taken hold in the shadows of our gleaming uptown.

Yes, we should have seen it coming.

Then last year, when Charlotte police officer Randall Carrick was tried for the shooting of Jonathan Ferrell, we all held our breath. When the trial ended in a hung jury, we held our breath a little deeper.

Yes, we should have seen it coming.

So when Keith Scott was shot by a CMPD officer under circumstances that raised all sorts of questions about police training and policy, our neighbors couldn't keep quiet any longer.

Yes, when it comes to asking ourselves if we know the widow from Jesus' parable, the answer seems clear. We know the widow. The widow was marching in the streets. The widow was demanding justice – and still is.

Some of us know the widow. Some of us are the widow, the ones who know the fragility of life if you are black in America, the ones who know that there are two sides to Charlotte, the ones who know first hand that justice in the form of equal economic opportunity has been quietly, almost invisibly held out of reach for too long.

Charlotte is not alone in its fault. But it is the one who has been slapped in the face, a wake-up call on the national nightly news.

Martin Luther King said “a protest is the voice of the unheard.” Their voices are no longer unheard.

And what about the judge in this parable, in our city? The judge is anyone who heard the repeated cries for justice and did nothing, or at least not nearly enough, not fast enough, not urgently enough.

The judge is the one – or the group - who controls the levers of power in Charlotte, who have the means and the influence to help make our city work for all of its residents.

And, to tell the truth, some of us are the judge, those of us who have allowed our privilege and, yes, our whiteness, to close our ears to the desperate appeals of our neighbors.

Now our city is busy. Busy meeting. Busy thinking. Busy gathering. Busy talking and, for some of us, we better be more busy listening. And we ought to be busy confessing that, as with the judge, our hearts had become hardened.

So, now we are busy. From conference rooms at the top of the uptown towers to coffee houses, including ours, the powerful and the dispossessed are meeting in their own huddles trying to find a way forward.

I have been at multiple meeting tables with both traditional power and the dispossessed. I have heard well-to-do African-Americans debate younger, less advantaged African Americans about what comes next. I have heard older African-Americans remind younger ones that, as President Obama said in Greensboro this week, social progress is a grind. And I have heard younger, less patient Black Americans say they will wait no more.

I have heard some white leaders say they were caught flat footed. I have also heard the traditional voices of power, including my old boss and friend Hugh McColl, confess that the city's leadership has not done enough to keep this moment of truth from coming.

I come away more convinced than ever of two things: First, the causes of our problems and their solutions are incredibly complex, made even more so by the multiplicity of perspectives our city's leaders and healers bring to the table. Second, this is a pivotal moment for Charlotte, one that history will judge as to whether we have heard and responded to the protests of the voiceless.

As much as anything, I am firmly convinced that we all must learn to live in the constructive tension in which we find ourselves. We cannot turn away too soon. Especially those of us with influence must sit down and listen deeply to those who have been voiceless. We must recognize the role of race and racism in how we got here. We cannot respond with cheap and temporary solutions that do not address the systemic causes of the inequities around us.

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In the parable of the unjust judge, Jesus relates the judge's inaction to how God hears and responds to the prayers of the persistent widow. Jesus asks whether God delays in answering the cries of the oppressed and quickly responds to his own question, "I tell you God will quickly grant justice to them."

This aspect of the parable raises tricky questions. Does God really always respond quickly to the mistreated in all circumstances? Those who feel so voiceless might ask that question. Or, is Jesus saying leave it all up to God, because God will come to the rescue of those whom our world kicks to the side of the road?

I can only say this: Jesus made it clear, in this parable and in many other instances, that God sides with the poor and the marginalized. So, we are best to let God be God. As for our actions, we know which side God is on. And we know what to do. Pray, yes, pray faithfully. But get busy in the meantime.

Today, we recommit our time, talent and treasure to join with God, to participate with the Lord in advancing the kingdom of God on earth, ushered in already by Christ. Today, we come together in our pledges and promises to stand to oppose what is wrong with the world, what is wrong with our city and we pray without ceasing that God would fix what is wrong within us.

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century integrationist and preacher/farmer Clarence Jordan from Georgia put it this way in his book about Jesus' parables:

*“We represent, as Jesus did, the kingdom of God over against the kingdom of this world. If there is no ‘over and against,’ there is no kingdom of God.”*

*“God cannot allow our witness to His kingdom to be blurred,” Jordan went on to say. “People need to see us as symbols of a new humanity.”*

Yes, Caldwell, through our pledges today and those to come, through who we are to each other and to all of our neighbors, people still need to see us – the people of God, the body of Christ - as symbols of a new humanity.

May our promises to take a new leap in our faith be received as our answer and statement over and against all that is wrong with our world.

May they be received as signs that we, even in our human frailty and imperfection, seek to make the most of what we have been given by a gracious, loving and just God.

Amen.