

## October 20, 2019 | Sanctuary worship service

**TEXT: Luke 18:1–8**

**TITLE: Justice Grants**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Easter next year will be on April 12th. I know that's several months away, but I want you to think about that holiday for a moment, because it actually consists of not one day but three. It includes Good Friday—the day of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross; Holy Saturday—the day of waiting and grieving for the crucified Savior; and Easter Sunday—the day of resurrection whose light from that empty tomb still shines in the darkness today. In this life you will experience all three days. You will know Good Fridays of suffering and pain. You will know Holy Saturdays of waiting, disappointment, and praying for change. And you will know Easter Sundays of hope and resurrection joy. The three days cannot be separated from one another. We endure Friday and pray persistently on Saturday because we believe in Sunday.

The parable Jesus told about the widow and the judge is a Holy Saturday story. It's almost comedic in its details. There's a crotchety, old judge who cares for neither God nor the people around him. He's a legal Grinch, hiding behind his locked doors and closed shutters. He's a judicial Scrooge, muttering about how he hates being disturbed by the incessant complaints of the poor and needy. In contrast, there's a widow who won't give up. Maybe she shouts for justice every time the judge sticks his head out his door. Maybe she pushes to the front of the line whenever people gather to plead their cases. When Jesus told this story, folks likely smiled to themselves because they knew unjust judges and they knew of feisty widows who wore them down by sheer persistence.

But after they chuckled, the listeners would sigh and shake their heads, wondering “How long must I wait for justice? How long must I trudge through my daily life disappointed about opportunities beyond my reach, fair treatment constantly outside my grasp, and justice delayed that almost inevitably becomes justice denied?”

We're not told what the issue was for this widow. Maybe it was a debt someone owed her. Maybe it involved property unjustly taken from her. The details don't matter. This woman existed in a culture where there was almost no support available outside one's family structure. So if you didn't have a spouse or adult children or close relatives able to help you, you were out of luck. According to scripture, the job of the judges was to help the powerless, the marginalized, the widow, orphan, and alien in the land. But when judges refused to do this—when they feared neither God nor people—the only option left was to pray relentlessly for justice to be granted. “To grant justice” seems to be the operative phrase in this parable. Four times it appears. The widow cries out “Grant me justice.” The judge finally says, “I will grant her justice so she may not wear me out.” Then Jesus says twice, “Will not God grant justice to those who cry out? Yes, the Lord will quickly grant justice to them.”

In bible times and still today, people pray to God for a variety of reasons. People pray for victory over enemies and safety in times of war. People pray for healing of their bodies and pushing back on the ever-encroaching power of death. But in this parable, the prayers focus on justice—most likely, economic justice. The widow was owed something; she had been cheated out of something that was hers—something that she needed to survive. While the wealthy had plenty to eat and little to worry about, she had no choice but to badger the flinty old judge until he granted her justice at last.

Granting justice means several things. It first means we truly see those whom our economic and social systems push to the margins. Darren Walker is someone you should know. He's a gay man. He's an African American man. He's the president of the Ford Foundation, a philanthropy worth over \$13 billion. When asked what experience most prepared him to be president of the Ford Foundation, he said it was when he was 13 and he worked as a busboy in a restaurant. Busboys are the lowest persons in the organization. They are invisible and relevant only because they clean up after people and remove the things others discard. No one acknowledges you, speaks to you, or recognizes your dignity. Walker went on to say that knowing firsthand about the pervasive systems in America that render people invisible informed how he views his work at Ford.<sup>1</sup> He spoke about how the American economic system used to have the means for low-skilled workers to earn a wage that could produce a decent standard of living for families. His own mother with just a high school diploma and a certificate as a nursing assistant was able to do that. But those scenarios don't exist in today's world of substandard wages and no safety nets when trouble inevitably comes. Walker said, "There are solutions, but we capitalists don't like to talk about them: redistribution [of wealth] and regulation. If our capitalism is to be successful, we've got to talk about those two things."

Granting justice means seeing those whom our economic system pushes to the margins and working, praying, to help them be treated fairly. Granting justice also means recognizing how too many parts of our American economic system are designed more to benefit the unjust judge than the persistent widow. We have heard a lot in the news about how immigration agents go about their work in ways that cruelly separate parents from children. To make sense of this practice, we tell ourselves that the foundation of these immigration policies involves broken laws—either broken laws regarding residency and visas, or perhaps worse scenarios, like being guilty of criminal acts. What we don't ask ourselves is how are these supposed law-breakers actually caught?

I read a recent investigative article that described how immigration officers commonly use the tools of our economic system, not to catch dangerous criminals here illegally, but to round up the migrants who are working hard, caring for their families, and doing their best to be productive parts of American society.<sup>2</sup> It often starts with racial profiling—of following someone who looks Hispanic and taking down their license plate number to learn where they live. Sadly the more people play by the rules, the easier it is to find them and arrest them. In one case, ICE agents typed in a name into a common public record database and quickly found an address for a mobile home park and an email address that had been used by a family member hoping to get free baby products

from a website. When immigrant families dutifully pay their federal taxes, they have to use an Identification Number, since they don't have a Social Security number. However, that makes the families easily traceable by ICE. Remember, the persons haven't done something meriting arrest or a warrant; ironically it is their abiding by the rules that makes them easier to find and deport. An economic system that depends upon using migrant labor to do jobs America needs but most Americans won't do, coupled with a technology system that makes you easier to find the more you follow the rules and try to live the American dream, has led to a system of fundamental injustice for far too many people in our country today.

The widow kept pounding on the judge's door until at last he granted her justice. The same, insistent drumbeat of injustice is getting louder each day. It is something that touches all of our lives. As our nursing guests well know, the health care system in America is not serving us well. For all the wonderful medical advances that have been made, too many people can neither access nor afford the very care they deserve in their times of need. As our other guests and all of us know, the challenge of living in an interconnected world trying to balance national interests and global peace is getting harder and harder, whether that involves the crisis in Hong Kong, or England's woes with Brexit, or our government's total ineptitude in Syria that has led to death and despair for thousands of innocent people. And as we've seen recently, the threats arising from climate change also have economic impacts, such as suddenly shutting off electrical power to thousands of homes and businesses in California as fire-prevention measures, or weather-events wrecking havoc like typhoons in Japan and "bomb-cyclones" in Boston. The economic priorities many promote often insist their benefits will trickle down from the wealthy to the poor, so that all lives will improve. But instead of trickle down economics, we now have bubbling-up injustice—floodwaters of inequity, suffering, and environmental damage rising around us, prompting us and so many others to cry out, "How long, O Lord?"

Jesus told the parable about the widow and the judge to remind us about our need to pray always and not to lose heart. That can be a difficult lesson to take seriously. Our prayers are not magical incantations designed to force God to do our will. Prayers are when we honestly name the ways that life on this earth does not reflect the ways of God's kingdom. Prayers are when we hold to our belief that whatever sin has broken, God's grace and power can make right—naming how the false religions of economic privilege and wealth concentration are idols debasing a true faith in freedom, love, and justice. In this life we will know Good Fridays of pain, suffering and death. And many of our days on earth will be spent as if it were Holy Saturday—waiting, longing for something new to be born, for justice to flow down like mighty waters and righteousness like a never-failing stream. So we pray. We pray persistently, because we know God will not delay justice long. We work for justice as we are able, trusting that a day is dawning when the high will be brought low and the lowly raised high. We pray on all our Holy Saturdays, because the third day, Easter Sunday, is about to dawn.

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<sup>1</sup> "Corner Office: Inspired as a 13-Year-Old Busboy", interview of Darren Walker by David Gelles; *New York Times*, September 29, 2019; pg. BU 4.

<sup>2</sup> "The Watchers," McKenzie Funk, *New York Times Magazine*, October 6, 2019.