

Tenacious Spirituality

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

October 16, 2022

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

In 2006 I awakened before dawn many mornings in Bethlehem. The rooster was just beginning to crow in the distance as I ambled, still not fully awake, towards the Bethlehem Checkpoint, where many Palestinians daily cross into East Jerusalem for work or to visit family or friends. This was my job for three months; to observe the treatment of Palestinians on their own land by Israeli personnel in this a place of control.

It got on my nerves – as I watched Palestinians routinely disrespected, a voice through a loudspeaker, the Israeli officer in a bulletproof kiosk, tersely ordering Palestinians, young and old. Listening to the terse Hebrew phrases sounded so condescending even if I couldn't understand the language. If it bothered me this much, I could not fathom how this environment must impact Palestinians daily. My responsibility was to take photos, to talk to Palestinians, as well as Israeli officers who would talk to me. After the three months, I returned to the relative comfort of Canada, where I was to share stories as I am with you.

“Machsom Watch” – Machsom being Hebrew for “Checkpoint” – I didn't know about this Israeli organization when I arrived in the Middle East, but soon learned about them when there was a major shutdown of the Checkpoint the day I was there. This was a major problem for Palestinians – they cannot work, cannot go to health appointments in East Jerusalem, considered by the world community as land integral to Palestine, but not to Israel. Israeli officials had just stopped all movement of Palestinians, giving no reasons. I had been told that Machsom Watch was the last resort, but had their phone number.

It took awhile, but two women, armed with cell phones around their belts, like guns in a holster, arrived. They seemed to be using multiple phones simultaneously, and speaking with such authority with the young soldiers who seemed to be hiding in their kiosks. Palestinians are delayed daily, and chastised, denigrated by what are usually young Israeli soldiers. When Machsom Watch arrived, though, the dynamic changed – this was elder women of Israeli culture to whom young Israelis usually defer to. That day, when Machsom Watch arrived, there was great confusion, and I quite enjoyed watching the flipping of power dynamics.



¹This woman, her name is Hagit Back, and she is one of the veterans of Machsom Watch. Would you be cavalier in challenging this woman? I would not. They have been around for decades now, and operate from strong convictions that this occupation is wrong, and that Palestinians deserve advocacy.

We ponder today that widow of Luke's Gospel, the parable often dubbed “The widow and the unjust judge”. Jesus sets the story up in Luke by saying that

¹ Image from www.haaretz.com

this is about persistence in prayer, never giving up. The theme of the parable is grounded in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, God speaking through the prophets, admonishing the powerful to care for the widow, the orphan, and the refugee who are most vulnerable.

Did you notice in this Gospel reading?

...yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, Or so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.²

Most English Bible translations water down the wording, having the judge worried that the widow would wear him down. The actual Greek language that the story was originally told in, says pretty clearly that the judge worries about the widow punching him.³ Now that is funny, isn't it? It is supposed to sound funny, even outlandish. An analogy would be the survivors of Residential Schools seeking justice from churches who operated those schools. That justice, the sense of being fully heard, and feeling that abuse of power will never happen again – not yet. Not yet. This is not about justice for the underdog. It is about God's kin-dom vision. Why did Jesus tell this parable about a powerful judge feeling worried about a defenseless widow? Just prior to this passage in Luke's Gospel, Jesus had been talking about the end times; the kingdom or kin-dom coming, bringing a time of confusion and anxiety.

We all go through times like that, times of uncertainty and confusion, whether we are rich or poor. Some days we might more relate to the judge in the parable, but then other times life leaves us feeling like the widow. Faced with a diagnosis of cancer, coping with an addiction, or a barrage of expenses and you don't know how you will pay the bills. Seeing an injustice around us, perhaps it is fighting for someone else, even when it seems improbable that you or I will win.

I know of many modern-day widows – some close to me, some stories I've seen in the news – struggling for justice. Not just passively, but praying fervently. Working daily. that is at the heart of the meaning of God's kin-dom vision according to Jesus. It is an unfolding of God's vision for us, for our world, and it's happening around us. It's not easy. It seems to me almost like a woman in labour. You don't know the time of the birth, or how easy or hard. Yeah, I'm a man, I've never gone through it, never will. But God's kin-dom seems like that – it is a powerful and mysterious force, and it invites you and I to be part of it. It beckons us to believe in it.

We are called to work with the Spirit, never giving up, bringing a new order, God's kin-dom vision, into this world.

What is the most outrageous injustice you can think of? God's kin-dom vision is about believing that God CAN right that wrong. God's vision can bring healing where it looks like the hurt will never end. But we must be a part of that work. We are not expected to

² Luke 18:5 (alternate translation) in New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE) © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

³ The absurd dynamics set up here, the judge with great power fearful of being hit by a widow who would be considered vulnerable and weak, comes from the Commentary on Luke 18: 1-8 by Brittany E. Wilson, Oct 20, 2019, <https://www.workingpreacher.org>

fix wrongs, but, instead, to pray tenaciously, to act tenaciously, daily, as if the answer to our prayer is within reach. If we persist, justice for the widow is possible, but she must believe it, and hammer on that door even if the odds seem against her. God doesn't care about odds or probabilities.

In our culture, our world, common sense dictates many odds and probabilities, as if doing the right thing is more like a gamble. The widow of the parable would have given up if she gave credence to the odds of her success. God's kin-dom dream seems to ignore common sense and odds. May we dare to believe, and never give up on that. Amen.