

Bishop Lee M. Miller II
Synod Assembly 2023: Restorative Justice
Luke 18:1-8

On October 30, 1948, fourteen men from the Arab Christian village of Eilaboun, were killed, 12 of them executed by soldiers after the village had surrendered.

Between the UN negotiated partition plan for Palestine adopted in November 1947 and 1949, between 700-900,000 Palestinians were forced from their homes and homeland and forced to live as refugees in Lebanon, Syria, and even as refugees in their own country.

Pr. Gabi Aelabouni, Desk Director of ELCA Eastern European, Middle-East, North Africa Region, told us the story of his hometown outside of the catholic church where many of the townspeople clung to one another in fear as the soldiers surround their small village.

Gabi's father was only six years old when villagers hid in the two churches.

The soldiers found the crowd of people in the church and first ordered the priest to come out.

The priest came out and the soldiers told him that they would execute him unless he chose 12 volunteers to come outside.

Reluctantly, the pastor went back into their church and 12 men came out.

Soldiers took the twelve into the adjacent courtyard, Gabi showed us the courtyard, were the twelve were executed.

The townspeople were then told to leave. Leave their homes, leave their village, and never to return.

The pastor, and some of the oldest and some of the youngest were left as a remnant.

The event was documented by UN observers, and there is a 2007 documentary entitled "The Sons of Eliaboun"

But the story does not end there.

While the villagers marched out of town to become refugees in Jordan, the village priest began to write letters, to complain bitterly with whoever would listen of this story of expulsion and demand for the townspeople to be returned.

The Pastor's letters were read by the archbishop, and then by the Vatican, and after pressure from the Pope, and in dialogue with the Israeli government – the villagers were allowed to return home – and in so doing receive Israeli citizenship. Gabi says, they even brought along some refugees who weren't from their town and hadn't been so fortunate.

It was the persistence of the people – to thrive at any cost.

And the persistence of the pastor and local priests to continue to call out, cry out, write, for justice!

And if one were to ask why Palestinian people continue to cry out from the home of their ancestors it is because they cannot, not persist.

When it is a matter of liberation, the liberation of one's family, one's people, God's people, then one persists.

...

We don't know what cause in need of justice brought the widow knocking on the judge's door.

Traditionalists might say it was a housing issue.

Later, in Luke, Jesus will warn the crowd to beware of the teachers of the law, for they like to walk around in flowing robes, but they also "devour widows houses."

And so maybe it's a justice issue related to housing.

Perhaps the bankers are engaged in some predatory lending practices, her mortgage had an accelerating rate and she's caught in a trap.

Or maybe she was redlined. Denied a mortgage altogether because of her gender, or the color of her skin.

And that's why she's knocking on the door, it's about her home.

And yet the judge doesn't answer.

So, she gets up, and goes back again, and keeps knockin'.

Maybe her son has been incarcerated.

It's not that he wasn't doing anything wrong. He was wrong.

He made a mistake.

But his mistake wasn't different than many others who make the same mistake, and yet they are not incarcerated.

Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at 5 times the rate of white Americans.

Nationwide, African American children represent 32% of children who are arrested, 42% of children who are detained, and 52% of children whose cases are processed to criminal court.

Keep in mind, African American children represent only 14% of the population.

And despite the fact that the US makes up nearly 5% of the world's population, the US is home to 25% of the world's prison population. ⁱ

Michelle Alexander, author of "The New Jim Crow," writes that "The genius of the current caste system, and what most distinguishes it from its predecessors, is that it appears to be voluntary. People choose to commit crimes, and that's why they are locked up or locked out, we are told...But herein lies the trap. All people make mistakes. All of us are sinners. All of us are criminals. All of us violate the law at some point in our lives." We may be done so on our way here, driving on the thruway.

"Yet there are people in the United States serving life sentences for first-time drug offenses, something virtually unheard of anywhere else in the world." (Alexander, The New Jim Crow)

Maybe that's why she's knocking on the judge's door. And that's why she persists, because this is about her baby – it could be about your baby!

And yet the judge still doesn't answer.

And so, she gets up, and goes back again, and keeps on knocking.

Maybe it's not her home, maybe it's not her son, maybe she is in grief.

Really the only thing we know is that she is a widow.

Could it be that her spouse has died.

And because her marital status has been denied,

It doesn't matter how long they were married,

It doesn't matter the life they shared,

It didn't matter how much she loved her, and how she had cared for her through her illness, watched her body fail as her mind maintained, held her in her arms as they died.

And now – now the courts have the audacity to say she has no rights.

No right to prepare for a decent funeral.

No rights for a peaceful burial.

No rights to their property, their assets,

As if their marriage never existed, never mattered. As if their love was not real.

You might have some privilege if no one has ever legislated over your health care, or your welfare, or who you love.

And so maybe that's why she persists, pursues justice, pounds on the door of the judge's chamber, her knuckles dry, cracked, and bleeding,

Until finally the judge says –

ENOUGH!!!!

"Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually knocking."

Enough.

They have worn me out.

Someone say, "hallelujah."

...

You know I've heard some good preachers try to spin a proclamation on the possibility that this unjust judge is in fact the judge of the heavens and the earth,

And beloved, that theology leaves us in the grave.

For if God only grants justice because we knocked hard enough or long enough, or a widows knuckles bleed out enough, then this God is not a God of grace, and Christ has died in vain.

But, in fact, the good news is that God did give God's own life for ours, did choose to love us, even when we were yet still sinners, and died for our sake. And rose again.

And because God's love for us is unconditional,

And because God chooses to liberate us, not because of anything we've done, but because of who God is, not because of who we are, but because of what God has done –

Jesus draws a definite distinction between this unjust judge in the parable,

And the One who is the I am.

And the Lord said,

"Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones..."

And will not God grant justice.

And will not God...

It's just a little word.

"de" De

Translated in our NRSV as "And" "And will not God" – de.

But more often than translated as "and" the Greek word "de" in Luke's Gospel is translated as:

"But"

As in – "*But* the angel said to Zechariah 'do not be afraid.'"

And "*But*, a Samaritan while traveling came near him, and when he saw him, he was moved with pity."

And "those who love their life will lose it, *BUT* those who lose their life will keep it,"

And "*But* when they went in the tomb, they did not find the body."

De

But will not God grant justice quickly.

"De" is used to make this distinction clear. Our God is not like a maligning magistrate,

This judge may have ruled in the widow's favor out of exhaustion –

But God chooses to grant justice to God's people. And to do that quickly!

But God chooses to act in justice – and builds a home within our hearts.

But God chooses to do justice – and acquits God's people with liberating love.

But God chooses us, empowers us to share in this justice – that we might stand with our siblings whose lives are threatened because of that same love.

But God – does Justice, forms us in loving-kindness, and walks with us daily.

....

But then get this – Jesus calls us, calls the church into action.

"Yet, when the Son of Man comes, will they find faith on earth?"

Now what kind of faith is Jesus talking about?

The only example of faithfulness in this parable, in this chapter so far.

Is the faith of the widow.

Who despite the odds.

Despite the disappointment and discouragement.

Despite the ignorance and not so veiled attempts to malign.

Despite the oppression and micro-aggressions.

Continued to have the audacity to hope – and knock on the judge’s door one more time.

...

Dear Church, let’s have a faith like that.

Let us claim our baptismal rite – and by that I don’t mean to turn the promises of baptism into a neo-justification for grace –

I mean let us claim our baptism – like believe in what God has called us to be.

Let us claim our baptismal covenant to share the love of God in word and deed and

Let us claim our baptismal promises...

Because God did not form us to be the church for the sake of these assemblies.

God formed us to be the church to activate us for justice and joy.

We reflect on and learn about ways of doing justice at this assembly so that we can take it home with us and practice it!

Let us not delay, or be discouraged in our persistence,

But let justice roll down like waters,

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet> June 1, 2023