

“For the Children”
Luke 18:1-8a, James 1:27
Children’s Sabbath
October 14, 2007

“The kind of religion which is without stain or fault in the sight of God is this: to go to the help of orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself untarnished by the world.” (James 1:27, New English Bible)

They called her “Lay Lay.” She was a first grader at Saratoga Elementary School right here in the city in which all of us now call home. She had her whole life ahead of her. But her life was cut short a week ago last Friday in a hail of gunfire. Bullets fired in anger by two teenagers ripped through a car and into the fragile little body of Alazia Alford. Now six year olds are not involved in the culture of drugs and gangs. Six year olds do not understand the social and economic forces that cause some parts of our hometown to be different from other parts. Six year olds do not take part in the racial politics that often tend to divide rather than unite us. Six years olds are just kids. They are children. And it is up to adults of every color and culture to protect them from the bullets that have the potential to snuff out their lives.

On this day that has been designated as “Children’s Sabbath,” we are called to take a good hard look at how we treat our children. And when I speak of “our children,” I do not simply mean our biological offspring or those preparatory members of our church family. I am talking about those youngest members of our human family, those hometown kids like Lay Lay, as well as those little ones throughout our nation and around this world whose lives have been disrupted by all the problems that big people so often cause. Today is a day to stop, take stock, and remember that nations and their citizens, just like churches and their members, are always judged by how they respond to the least of those among them.

The text for this day is a strange one. You would think that on a day that is centered upon the needs of the children of the world, the powers that be would choose a

text like “Let the children come to me, for to such belong the kingdom of heaven,”¹ or “If anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble, it would be better for him to have a millstone around his neck and drowned in the depths of the sea.”² It seems to me that texts like those two, or even the one about receiving the kingdom of God as a child might be a more appropriate choice. But no, today’s text is the parable of the unjust judge. Even on days when we do not celebrate children that text is hard to understand. But what in the world does this particular story have to do with what we are about today? What in the world could the lectionary gurus have been thinking on this day when our focus is children? Well, perhaps its time for us to take a closer look.

Jesus began his parable by saying that “There was a certain judge in a certain city.” As city judges have always had a bit more clout than country judges, we know right away that Jesus understood this imaginary judge to be among the elite in his field. This fellow was top tier as far as judges go. But don’t think of him in the same way that we think of judges today. He did not preside over a civil or criminal court, nor did he wear a black robe and pound a gavel. No, this judge’s main job was to help the people of Israel follow God’s law. Specifically, he was called to help interpret and implement all the laws found in the first five books of the Bible, that piece of holy writing we call “torah.” It was the most important job that a person of faith could have at that particular time in history. But this judge was, in a word, shameless. Jesus said the he did not fear God nor did he respect people—two of the main requirements of torah. Remember how the Hebrew Scriptures say that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” and how the people of the promise were called by Moses and all the prophets to love their neighbor. But Jesus said that this judge did neither. And Jesus said this judge really didn’t care that he didn’t. He was absolutely shameless.

One day a widow came to him asking for help. This would not have been an unusual occurrence. The scriptures tell us that the heart of God has always had a special place for widows, orphans, the homeless, and all of those others who cannot make it on

¹ Matthew 19:14

² Matthew 18:6

their own. As a matter of fact, there are passages in the Psalms and the Prophets that specifically say that God's people are supposed to help folks like those who cannot help themselves, as there was no social safety net in those days for those who had been left all alone. The widow in this story simply came to the judge and asked him to do the right thing, to uphold the very law to which he was sworn. But again, Jesus said that this judge had no regard for anything or anyone and so he refused. He would not grant her that for which she asked. This particular widow, however, would not take "no" for an answer. She came before the judge over and over again asking him to help. Actually, the word that Jesus used to describe this woman has a very close connection to the word we use for "nagging," and despite all of the good joke possibilities that exist right now, I'll just leave it at that. I don't look stupid, do I?

Well, at this point in the story, Jesus lets us in on a little bit of the reasoning that is going on inside the judge. The translation known as The Message puts that inner dialogue like this: *"I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this woman won't stop badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—or else I'm going to end up black and blue by her pounding!"* Not exactly a good reason for doing the right thing, is it? Not a very good indication that the judge has moved away from his shamelessness at all. Yet he decided to help her just the same. He granted the woman what she wanted just so she would shut up. Then Jesus ends his parable by saying, *"And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them."* With that Jesus ends his very strange story.

Now there have been many interpretations of this strange parable down through the years, some a lot better than others. There are a whole lot of folks, for instance, who like to use the "how much more" approach. Jesus used that approach in the Sermon of the Mount when he said, "If God so clothed the lilies of the field, how much more will he clothe you?"³ There are those who use that idea to say that if a shameless judge who doesn't even like this widow will help her simply to get her off his back, how much more

³ Matthew 6:30

will the God who loves her beyond measure help? That interpretation seems to work well until we realize that Jesus doesn't make use of the "how much more" approach here. It's just not in this story. So other people have tried to be faithful to the way in which Luke introduced the story and say that this parable is all about persistence in prayer. You've heard that one before. This interpretation takes the allegorical approach and says that God is like that judge, that we are like that widow, and that if we keep bringing our petitions before God over and over again, our prayers will finally be answered. Now there is nothing wrong with persistence, but stop and think about it. Is that really the way we want to picture our God? "Our Father who art in heaven" is like an unjust judge who will not grant his children's request until he is so sick and tired of hearing their incessant nagging that he finally gives in and gives them whatever they want? Is that what Jesus means? Is that what the apostle Paul meant when he told us to "pray unceasingly?" I am going to be bold enough to say "probably not."

So let's rethink this. Let's take another tack. I think that there is another way to see this parable. Let's keep the allegorical approach, but let's turn it around. What if Jesus didn't want us to think of God as the judge, what if he wanted us to think of us as that judge? It is not a stretch to do so. Remember, the judge in this story knew what God's law said and was supposed to keep it—just as people of faith know what God's law says and are also supposed to keep it. The judge knew that he was supposed to support and uphold those who cannot help themselves, but he chose not to do so—just as people of faith so often choose not to do so. And it took how many pleas from the widow before he finally acted? How many times are we going to have to hear the pleas of the widow before we respond to her needs? How many times are we going to have to hear the cries of help of the children and all those others who cannot defend themselves before we finally do something? Ten times? Twenty-five times? A hundred times? Or does it take the tragic death of a six-year-old little girl to finally get our attention and do what God has been asking us to do from the very beginning?

That may be an unfair question, but it is one that needs to be asked. How many times is it going to take for us to hear the cries of the widows and children from all over

our city? How many times are we going to hear their cries for help before we actually do something about it? I have listened to all the stories of the shootings in North Omaha with interest. A lot of them happened in places that I used to ride my bike, places where I used to play with my friends, places where once upon a time I could be and not have to think at all about my safety. But even though that area is very familiar, they really did not affect me. Did not affect me, that is, until this last one. It has really hit me hard. Maybe that is because that after 15 years I have a 10-year-old in my house again. Maybe that is because six days a week our church is filled with kids just as old as little Lay Lay. Or maybe that is because somehow I believe gang members simply get what they deserve. Whatever the case may be, this one is different. This one hurt. And I just can't get her little six-year-old face out of my mind.

So I decided to try and do something about it. I remembered that one of the United Methodist churches in North Omaha is trying to start an after-school program for kids at risk. The Revs. Charlotte Abram and Ralph Gaines are the pastors of the new Tri-Community UMC, a combination of the old Pearl, Asbury, and Trinity congregations. So I wrote to Charlotte and asked her if there was anything I could do and that Elkhorn Hills could do to help. Did they need money? Did they need people? I expected her, of course, to say "yes." What church doesn't need money and people? What I didn't expect was the way I got that "yes." When she opened my e-mail, Ralph was apparently sitting right next to her. She told me that she turned her laptop toward him and showed him my note. He responded not only with a "Thank you, Jesus!" but also with a note to me. Here is part of what it said:

Dr. [Randy] Sailors (our District Superintendent) called me into his office and told me to go and start a new church. I was excited...but I thought to myself, "Why would God want me to start this church?" ...I just didn't know how I was going to be able to do this. I am dealing with socio-economic problems, low income, no income, and crime (shootings, killings, drug selling, and usage). Where is the money going to come from? ...I mailed out 45 fund-raising letters just like I was told to do at Boot Camp (a start-up seminar for pastors of new churches). So far I have received checks from only four

people. Things were just not coming together and I was questioning if this is what I am supposed to do. Then there is the after-school program where we have children from the community coming Monday through Friday ...I was literally begging for volunteers from the merged congregation...and getting no help. Then it happened (I'm assuming that at least a part of what that means is that he got my e-mail). God got through to me. Even though I don't know where the money or the people are going to come from, I now knew that I was called to work in North Omaha. I need to build this new church by reaching out to youth. I need to reach the youth because there are too many getting hurt or worse [killed]. I believe that [the only way we are going to solve the problem is by making] disciples for Jesus in North Omaha.

I agree. God knows how to solve the problems of North Omaha, South Omaha, East Omaha, and even right here in West Omaha. We know how to solve the problems as well—the answers have been sitting in Holy Scripture since the beginning. Moses said, “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.”⁴ Zechariah said, “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor.”⁵ Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.”⁶ So why haven't I? Why haven't you? We have all heard the cries. We know the situation. How many times do they have to cry out? Our brothers and sisters, the fellow citizens of our hometown, are waiting to hear what you and I will do. And so is our God.

I have written a check for \$100. I want to ask 19 of you to do the same right now. If you can't give \$100, give whatever you can. Come up after the benediction and lay your check on the open Bible on our altar. Darla Langendorfer and I are meeting with Charlotte and Ralph on Tuesday and I want to give them at least \$2000 so that they can have the resources they need to help some of the children of North Omaha. When the four of us get together, the first thing I am going to ask is what can I personally do to help the situation that is occurring in the very streets on which I grew up. Then I am going to

⁴ Exodus 22:22

⁵ Zechariah 7:9-10

⁶ Matthew 22:37-39

ask her what the people of Elkhorn Hills, the people I love and serve, can do to help. It may take us going down to 24th and Ogden Streets or over to Fontenelle Boulevard and helping with the after-school program. It may take the opening our gym so that some of those kids can have a place to play. It may take a long period of unceasing prayer until the violence in our city finally comes to an end. I don't know what it is going to take, but I do know that it is going to take someone doing something. The word of God, which all of us claim to be at the center of our lives, demands it. The tradition of our denomination, which all of us claim to be a part, demands it. And the memory of little Lay Lay, that very innocent victim of a very terrible problem, demands it as well.

We are called to protect our children, especially the poorest and most vulnerable among us. We have known it from the very beginning. Jesus said that we would be judged by the way we respond “to the least of these.”⁷ On this Children's Sabbath ask yourself how many times you will have to hear the cries of those who need help before you do what you already know what you are supposed to do? If your answer is only one, then you are not far from the kingdom of God.

⁷ Matthew 25:31-46