

October 20, Ordinary 29C (Luke 18:1-8)

Injustice comes with so many alibis and aliases.

by [JoAnn A. Post](#) in the [October 9, 2019](#) issue

She had a cast-iron stomach. Ginger, our golden retriever, ate anything we put in front of her and anything she found. She took such joy in eating that it was hard to deny her, but when she tipped the scales at 80 pounds our veterinarian had a stern talk with me. “You can’t always give her what she wants,” he said.

Ignoring the confused look in Ginger’s eyes, we altered her diet and increased her exercise. Gradually, she lost the extra weight, and I lost interest in monitoring it. As long as neither she nor the vet barked at me again, we were fine.

But around her tenth year, she stopped maintaining her weight. Her soft coat started to thin; her bright eyes to dim. In desperation, we fed her anything she wanted, but she wanted nothing. She no longer licked the dirty dishes in the dishwasher or slowly swept the kitchen floor with her long tail, waiting for morsels to drop from above. Within months, she was rangy and ribbed.

Our vet diagnosed her with an untreatable liver cancer and cautioned us, kindly, that Ginger’s remaining time with us was short.

“Will she be in pain? How will we know if she hurts?”

“You may not,” he admitted. We were to watch for sleeplessness, pacing, a change in temperament—but dogs can’t tell you when they hurt. Or what they need.

A few days before she died, I lay beside her on the floor, stroking her soft fur, whispering in her floppy ear, “Do you hurt, Ginger? Are you sad? What do you need? Please tell me.”

Ginger was silent. I wept.

We can be forgiven for failing to recognize the pain of another when they can neither recognize nor speak their own sadness. But there is no forgiving us when we choose not to hear, when we turn away from another's pain.

By that standard, the unjust justice in Luke's parable would be deemed absolutely unforgivable. Though dogged by a persistent widow day and night, the judge refuses to hear her pain, refuses to acknowledge her request, pretends she doesn't exist.

Luke doesn't reveal the specifics of her complaint, only that she has been treated unjustly. Kudos to the widow for her persistence, but what, exactly, was the injustice?

Perhaps her son has been wrongly imprisoned or her sister abruptly fired. Maybe she herself has suffered age discrimination. It might be that her brother is being detained at the border or her deceased husband's lawyer is dragging his heels in settling the estate. Perhaps she has been driven into bankruptcy by exorbitant medical bills.

Injustice comes with so many alibis and aliases. I want to look in her eyes and ask, "Do you hurt? What do you need?" But both she and Luke remain silent.

A colleague once served a contentious congregation which he deemed the most ill-named congregation in the church: "Peace Lutheran Church" was anything but. The judge in this parable does not deserve the title "justice."

Or does he? In one of the more obtuse of Jesus' parables, we struggle to discern his intent. Are we to pester God with our needs, as the widow pesters the justice? Is God as immune to our cries as the justice is to hers? Is the goal of our prayers to receive compensation for injustice, or simply to wear out an exasperated God? I'm not comfortable with any of those interpretations.

But wait. The justice is deemed unjust even though he responds to the widow's pleas. Something is awry.

Does the injustice in this parable lie in the judge's self-attested cynical character or in his reluctance to respond? And we don't know that she has in fact been treated unjustly—Luke provides no corroborating evidence. How do we know that her complaint has merit?

So what is the greatest injustice? That the woman was mistreated? That the justice is slow to respond to her claims? Or that, ultimately, he acts with mercy, regardless of the merits of her case?

After all, her request is granted without benefit of trial or jury. Where is the justice in that? Without reviewing her claims, the justice grants her request. Is it merely justice that she receives, or an even greater gift?

Perhaps Luke is hinting that Jesus is also unjust, because Jesus hears the prayers of righteous and unrighteous alike. Perhaps Luke is implying that Jesus' justice is based not on the merits of the case but on his expansive, explosive, inexplicable love and mercy for sinners. Is it just to forgive sinners who will sin again, to feed those who will hunger again, to heal those who will be sick again, to raise those who will die again? In some quarters, Jesus' kindnesses would be deemed not only unjust, but foolish.

At the end of the parable, Jesus promises that all who cry will be heard, all in need will be helped. Jesus promises that justice—Jesus' justice—will be served without delay.

I still grieve my inability to recognize Ginger's pain and grief. Had she asked for a meal of oysters on the half shell and champagne, I would have fed her by hand. But we could not know her complaint. Like the unjust justice, we knew only that she was troubled. My husband and daughters and I loved Ginger and cared for her until, cradled in our younger daughter's arms, she breathed her last.

Finally, like the persistent widow, Ginger was heard and loved. She received the justice of a gentle, peaceful death. Finally, Jesus is that unjust justice—delivering kindness and mercy to all who cry out, regardless of the merits of our case.