

A neurodiverse God?

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge might give us a radical look at the face of God.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 3, 2020](#) issue



Parable of the Unjust Judge (Granovitaya Palata, 1881-2). (Photo by Belousov Brothers (Palekh) via Creative Commons license)

Not long ago I found myself addressing a conference on theology and neurodiversity—I believe the first of its kind. As I prepared, I reflected on the story of the widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18. The parable is deceptively simple. It declares itself to be about prayer, but readers of the parables learn to be wary of limiting their interpretation to the ways they are introduced. In the story we meet a judge who is impervious to the judgment of God and uninterested in the judgments of his fellow citizens. Then we meet a widow who continually bothers him, calling for him to vindicate her in the face of injustice. The contrast is clear: a judge stands in the place of God, who alone is judge, while the widow occupies one of the three key roles that provide in the Old Testament a touchstone for the faithfulness of Israel, the others being the orphan and the stranger. What each has in common is that they

have no male relatives to step in and advocate on their behalf. The widow is thus the epitome of vulnerability, while the judge is the epitome of power.

And yet the widow is indeed vindicated. Not because the judge has pity, or because he comes to see the justice of her cause. No, he yields only because she becomes a nuisance. He becomes worn out with her pleading.

What struck me was that both characters display what might be portrayed as characteristics of autism. Let's look first at the judge. You could say he displays neurodiverse characteristics that amplify the stigmatization of neurodiverse people. He seems set on his own purpose, and he doesn't see why the widow should alter it. He has a public role but a very limited understanding of how best to carry it out. He doesn't fear God or the opinions of others. He seems rather caught up in his own world. It seems almost impossible for him to walk a mile in someone else's shoes. It doesn't seem to matter how much distress he causes the widow—he won't be diverted from his course of action. It seems not so much selfish as blinkered. Eventually he changes his approach—not because he changes his mind, but because the new course of action seems convenient to him.

One might argue that such an interpretation is unduly negative about autism. But remember that what we're being given here is a portrayal of God. It's God who is portrayed as having these neurodiverse characteristics.

Now let's look at the widow. You could say she is slow to pick up the social signals. We can imagine how in various subtle and unsubtle ways the judge makes it clear he isn't interested in her petition. Today we might say these would include not replying to her letters, letting his assistant answer the door to her and always being too busy to see her, getting a security device fitted so that she could not get near his home, and avoiding his front door so he would never meet her pleading at the gate. We might say a neurotypical person would pick up the hint that he wasn't interested.

But perhaps the widow isn't a neurotypical person. So she doesn't back off when a lot of people would. Maybe this parable is telling us that if disciples are to pray, they should pray in a neurodivergent way. They should be relentless, not back off, not take no for an answer, refuse to accept a logic that yields to whatever malpractice the judiciary is prone to. Could we be seeing here a portrayal of neurodiverse behaviors that are regarded as normative for Christians?

Perhaps this parable offers us a radical picture of a God who has significant neurodiverse characteristics, and a remarkable picture of discipleship as modeled in important ways on a neurodiverse character type. But let's just for a moment swap the characters round. Rather than identify with the widow, let's see ourselves as the judge. Maybe God is the widow—the one who is constantly seeking to get our attention, who will work on our conscience or our pride or our pity or anything within range in order to move us to respond to the divine call and live lives of righteousness and mercy. And maybe we are the judge—the one who is impervious and wrongheaded, who has no care for God's favor or for human esteem. Maybe it's only when we turn the parable around in this way that it begins to make more sense. God is the one who in a neurodiverse way perseveres against impossible odds and trudges on when most would back off. We are the ones who exhibit the negative associations of neurodiversity, being unwilling or unable to yield except in order finally to take away the source of our discomfort.

Fearing I might impose my own labels and prejudices, I didn't tell the audience these things: I just gave them the categories and then switched them around. The specific list of characteristics came from a group brainstorm; almost all of the 90 people in the group were themselves neurodiverse. The real question became not whether this story was positive, encouraging, or constructive, but whether it showed us the face of God. Within 20 minutes we began to think perhaps neurodiversity could show us the face of God like never before.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A neurodiverse God?"