The Badgered Judge

“Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (Luke 17.37). This is not one of Jesus’ most beloved sayings. Nor is it as well known as it deserves to be. I quote it not for its intrinsic interest, considerable as that might be, but because it sets the stage for the parable of the badgered judge, this morning’s lesson at the beginning of the 18th chapter of Luke’s Gospel. Back in chapter 17, the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming. They anticipated it with confidence, sure that when it came they would be vindicated and that Israel’s enemies would get what was coming to them. But Jesus’ answer shocks them. He portrays what’s coming as horrific, a scenario to gladden the heart of a doomsday prepper, but it terrifies any sane person. It will be like the days of Noah; sudden destruction overcoming the unsuspecting: wedding parties swept away in the flood. It will be like Sodom; fire and sulphur raining from the sky. Run for your life: you won’t make it if you stop to grab your belongings. To people with a dark collective memory of forebears carried off into exile by foreign invaders Jesus foretells: “two people will be sleeping side by side: one will be taken, the other left. Two women grinding corn, one taken, the other left behind.” Death, destruction, misery; nowhere to hide.

The disciples ask, “Where will these things happen?” They don’t ask “When will these things happen?” That’s what we might have expected. We hear dire predictions of impending doom and our first question is when is all this supposed to happen. I think the fearsome picture Jesus paints of what’s coming has shaken them because it sounds
as though the horrors are going to befall Israel, not her gentile adversaries. They have no doubt about God’s coming judgment but they expect it there, not here; on them, not us. “Where will this happen?” Jesus answers: “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

Thus ends chapter 17, and now chapter 18 begins. Having scared them half to death, Jesus wants to encourage them for the coming ordeal. Luke reports that Jesus tells them a parable about their need to pray and not lose heart. In other translations it’s not give up. In the King James, it’s, “And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.” As a boy, clueless as to the niceties of Elizabethan English, I heard it literally: the alternative to always praying is to faint, to pass out and fall flat on your face. In context, this might be closer to the original intent: Jesus’ appalling vision of what’s in store is enough to make you swoon in fright.

An Israel that rejects its call to be a light to the gentiles, a house of prayer for all people, a kingdom of kings and priests bearing witness to the one true God, and instead proudly clings to a vision of nationalistic identity and religious purity has abandoned its God is lifeless, a mere corpse from whom God’s spirit has departed. Above all, if now it rejects its own Messiah, its very reason for being, it is dead. Israel’s last chance is at hand. To recall another parable: if the vineyard’s long-suffering owner sends his own son, and the tenants kill him, nothing lies ahead but judgment and destruction. Nothing remains but for the carrion to feast on the remains.

If the traditional date for the composition of the Gospel is correct, about AD 60, Luke writes on the brink of the predicted catastrophe. Israel’s simmering insurrection against Rome is about to boil over with devastating consequences, massacres, mass crucifixions,
Jerusalem besieged and burned, the Temple destroyed—not one stone left standing upon another—and the land turned into a killing field. Contemporary scholarship favors a later date, maybe a decade after the fall of Jerusalem. If so, Luke’s recounting of Jesus’ prophecy would have elicited horrible memories. At times during the siege, hundreds, even thousands of Roman crosses surrounded Jerusalem, the air full of the cries of the dying and, perhaps, the vultures feeding on them. Either way, it’s no surprise that Luke makes it explicit: Jesus’ parable is for the sake of the remnant who will follow him into the coming disaster. Caught in the horror they can only have faith in God and not give up, lose heart, faint. When—maybe precisely when—everything goes to hell and God seems absent he is most assuredly there, waiting on our prayers, determined to save us despite ourselves.

Why, though, does Jesus choose this little tale about a corrupt judge and a pugnacious widow who demands justice from him? The standard lesson was: even an unjust judge will give you what you ask for if you keep asking; how much more confident we can be that God, who is just, will hear our pleas! Maybe that’s not exactly wrong, but it seems a bit off. The woman isn’t asking for what she wants, or for what she needs; she’s demanding her due. She’s insisting that the judge give her what she is owed.

Whatever we hope to get from God, it’s not justice. What we seek in our prayers is love, help, mercy, grace, forgiveness, none of it deserved. None of it what he owes us. When it comes to giving, with God it’s always more and better than we can ask or imagine, let alone deserve. Nor, on the down side, do we want an exacting divine judge who sees to it that we get whatever our misdeeds warrant. (The other guy, sure, but not me.) When it comes to wrongdoing God forgives and commands us to do the same. Someone—no
one actually knows who—said, “Let justice be done, though the heavens fall!” but this is not the voice of God. God speaks from the cross, and he says, “Father, forgive them!”

Yet the parable is about justice. Oppressed Israel wants its pagan enemies ground to dust by the God of Israel. It dreams of a revolt backed up with avenging armies of angels that decimate the Roman legions. The Pharisees, the best and the brightest, long for vindication: we are the faithful, the pure, we keep the law with a vengeance: we want what we deserve. God accepts us and rejects them: let the world at last see it!

But Jesus knows that this thirst for vindication leads only to death. I think Jesus’ parable mocks our quest for justice. Sometimes, as in the calamity sure to come from Israel’s contest with Rome, it brings tragedy. Sometimes, it’s just silly. The judge in the parable is ridiculous; the justice he represents is bogus: he could not care less about God or man, but he’ll give this old bird what she wants to shut her up. The judge says to himself, “This widow keeps bothering me. I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out!” N. T. Wright’s translation brings out the comedic element: the term that our lesson renders “wear me out” he translates “give me a black eye,”—literally: to bruise someone under the eye—which was, apparently, an idiomatic expression for getting in someone’s face and harassing him, maybe smacking him around. Maybe the case has dragged on interminably, and whatever was originally at stake has receded into insignificance in contrast to the need to win, to get justice. Maybe she’s gotten a bit crazy over it; that’s how these things go. The gas company once overcharged my mother-in-law—I think it was $92—and she persisted, sucked more deeply into its bottomless bureaucracy as the years went by...as far as I know, it goes on even now, Kafka Power and Light of Newark, New Jersey—or whatever it’s called—sublimely
indifferent to her pleas. The point is not, I think, that God is just so we should pray to him, but that what we call justice is bogus, absurd, and often deadly.

Harry Block, the character Woody Allen plays in Deconstructing Harry, descends into hell in pursuit of his abducted girlfriend. As the evaluator carries him into the depths, a voice announces:

Floor Five: subway muggers, aggressive panhandlers, and book critics  
Floor Six: right-wing extremists, serial killers, lawyers who appear on television  
Floor Seven: the media (sorry, that floor is all filled up)  
Floor Eight: escaped war criminals, TV evangelists, and the NRA  
Lowest Level: everybody off!

Harry steps out of the elevator into a scene from Dante’s nightmares. Baleful red light and flames everywhere. Benny Goodman jazz blares. Harry wanders among the damned: hell’s hopeless denizens, naked, writhing, poked and prodded by devils with pitchforks.

Suddenly, a voice he recognizes: “Harry! Get me out of here! This is terrible. You know how I could never stand the hot weather!” It’s his father, chained to his personal demonic tormentor. Harry demands, “What is this man doing here?” Matter of factly the demon answers, “He’s condemned to eternal suffering.” Harry says, “I don’t understand...what are the charges?” The devil unrolls a scroll and reads the indictment: The man has been a terrible father, making his son a miserable, neurotic mess, incapable of a decent life outside his imagination. This far into the film we know that this is the sober truth. We see it: there in the bowels of hell Harry’s father is
unrepentant; he insists that he treated his son just as he deserved. Even there, he cannot stop madly blaming Harry for the death of his wife, who died in childbirth.

And now comes the moment of sheer grace, so far as I know unique in all Woody Allen’s movies: Harry shouts, “I forgive him! What’s over is over. It is finished! Please, let him go to heaven!” His father objects: “I’m a Jew. We don’t believe in heaven!” “Where do you want to go then?” “To a Chinese restaurant.” Harry directs the demon: “Take him to Joy Luck. I love him despite everything.” The demon shrugs and releases him.

All is forgiven, hell is harrowed, love wins, and the claims of human justice are forever silenced. Justice will be done, but it will be God’s justice, not ours. Our justice is all about keeping score, everyone getting what they ought to get. The ancient Greeks had the idea of ∆ική, in Homeric times it was the compensation a commoner owed a noble for transgressing the social boundaries. Centuries later, Plato begins his Republic with Socrates asking, “What is justice?” What is ∆ικαιοσύνη? Someone says, “It’s when you give someone what you owe him, what is his. Like when your friend lends you his weapons and then you give them back.” To which Socrates, manifesting the annoying habits that eventually got him the hemlock, replies, “Do you mean that if your friend lends you his weapons, but then goes mad, it’s just to give them back?” “Well, no, of course not Socrates...” and they are off and running and philosophy was well launched.

These plausible ideas are built into the Greek language and pervade the classical world. In Luke’s text, the widow asks the judge, who is unjust—α̇δικε—to grant her justice—εκδικησον. But the common language obscures the crucial difference. God’s justice, the biblical “righteousness of God,” is something else altogether. It is God’s unshakeable faithfulness to his creation, his firm commitment to his covenant, his steadfast love for
his people, no matter how unworthy of that love they manage to be. God is just: this means that God is love. God’s justice does not compete with his love and mercy; it’s the same thing. He is not—thank God!—the judge who does justice. He is the God who hears us and will not delay in helping us, not because it is our due, but because he loves us.

Jesus says to be like the widow, who doesn’t give up, but persists in asking. There’s something of a paradox here: we should persist in asking because God will be quick in answering. If he does not delay, what do we need persistence for? The solution is that it’s our calling to trust him, to have the faith Jesus wonders about: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Or will we have given up on God? Not if we trust him, convinced that however bad things seem, however forgotten or taken in we might at the moment feel, the faithful God’s help is on its way and will arrive not late, but at the right time.

Amen.