

## 6.

# **As Much Justice as She Needed: Persisting for Gender Justice**

### **Luke 18:1-10**

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup> He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup> In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ <sup>4</sup> For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup> yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup> And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

<sup>9</sup> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”

### **Introductory Narrative**

Leader: Sajoe ha-ra! Acknowledge and apologize!

*ALL: Sajoe Ha-Ra! Acknowledge and apologize!*

Leader: Gong-shik sajoe Ha-Ra! Officially acknowledge and apologize!

*ALL: Gong-shik sajoe Ha-Ra! Officially acknowledge and apologize!*

Leader: Bobjok Baesang Hara! Legally compensate!

*ALL: Bobjok Baesang Ha-Ra! Legally compensate!*

The above chant was repeated in ascending voices with fisted hands energetically going up every time the leader’s chant started. Two surviving “comfort” *hamonis* (grandmothers), representing the three other survivors not in attendance, were seated in the centre of the crowd

that was standing facing the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, Korea. This was Wednesday, April 24, 2013. It was the 1074th Wednesday since the Korean “Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan” began, in 1992, organizing these Wednesday demonstrations in front of the Japanese Embassy. They are demanding that the Japanese government acknowledge the injustice done to over 200,000 women and girls who were kidnapped and sexually violated by Japanese soldiers during the Second World War.

There are today only five known survivors of these atrocities, and yet the Japanese government has not apologized publicly or even acknowledged this cruel and dehumanizing injustice. Women’s groups and networks within the Korean church and society have been working together all these years to raise awareness and mobilize for justice. Apart from these women’s groups and networks, plus an increasing number of men and boys who join them in front of the Japanese Embassy, the churches have not taken this violation of injustice on as part of their public theological agenda, for their public witness or advocacy. It has been treated as a “women’s only” agenda. It is an injustice that still carries with it a strong feeling of shame.

How long should these women persist without despair until justice can be granted them? Is 1074 times not enough to wear the grantors of justice to finally grant it? What kind of and whose persistent prayers need to accompany activism and advocacy for justice?

## **Background Notes**

In reading Luke 18:1-10 using the CBS, I have used this narrative of the Japanese “comfort”-women’s search for justice in order to socially locate the interpretation of issues of sexual violence to conflict zones, where women’s bodies become part of the battlefield. And yet these women’s persistent search for justice is often ignored and their injustice unacknowledged. When it comes to gender justice and women’s human rights, women do not get as much as they need.

This reading is a continuation of the discourse about the Son of Man: the disciples are to persist in prayer without despairing because the Son of Man will return as promised. In Luke 11:1-3, Jesus taught his followers the prayer for the kingdom's coming, a kingdom of justice?

The Hebrew Scriptures condemn the perversion of justice. According to Deuteronomy 27:19, “‘Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’” Judges are to be impartial arbiters and champions of the helpless (the poor, widows, orphans, foreigners) (See also Gen. 22:22, 23:6; Deut. 10:18, 16:19; Ps. 68:5; Eccl. 5:8; Is. 1:17, 10:2; Jer. 22:3).

But in this parable, the judge appears not to uphold the above standards. The widow is the embodiment of the oppressed and defenseless who suffer at the hands of corrupt exploitative leaders and unjust judges, taken advantage of by someone more powerful than her. The exploited widow is asking only for justice enough for herself.

The Hebrew hospitality code made it very clear that the community had a responsibility for the caring of widows, orphans, and strangers (most vulnerable because of their social location) even at the cost of oneself.

It can be scholarly argued that the main aim of the parable in Luke 18:1-10 is expressed through verses 5 to 8:

<sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth.

Luke underscores the disciples’ “need to pray always and not to lose heart.” The parable brings out the necessity of persistence on the believer’s part and the reality of God’s mercy: God takes the option for the poor and marginalized.

Yet this parable raises many unresolved issues regarding what happens when systems of justice are not functional or are discriminatory. What role does persistent prayer play? And is such prayer enough to bring repentant and restorative justice in the context of unjust systems? Verses 9-10 further complicate this discourse: “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”

Can systems of justice be compromised to favour “those who feel they deserve” against “those who do not deserve”? Let us consider the context of this parable, in particular, the reality of patriarchy and sexism. The widow likely had no son to inherit his father’s property, but she was courageous enough to demand justice enough for herself-against all the patriarchal and sexist manipulations.

Hebrew and Christian scriptures describe God as the one who cannot condone evil (see Gen. 18:25, Deut. 32:36, Ps. 50:4, 98:9, 135:14, Heb. 1:13, Acts 17:31, 2 Tim.4:8, Heb. 10:30). In this text, God is contrasted to the judge: if the unjust judge will eventually hear the persistent cries of the poor widow, how much more will the just, merciful, and loving God hear the cries for help if we persist in our call for mercy!

The following are some exegetical questions to consider:

- What is this story about?
- Who are the main characters?
- What do we know about each one of them?
- What do we know about the characteristics of a God-fearing judge during the time when this story was written?
- What did Judaism (during Jesus’ time) teach regarding how widows were supposed to be treated? (See, e.g., Ex. 22:22, 23:6, Deut. 10:18.)
- What were systems of ensuring that there was enough justice for widows and vulnerable persons?

## Questions for Reflection

In bringing the text to the community of readers, consider the following questions:

1. Where is God when people suffer injustice like the widow in the parable?
2. Where is God when young girls and women are kidnapped and turned into sexual slaves, like the Japanese “comfort” women?
3. Who are the marginalized people in our community/context who are persistently searching for justice? What are their stories? What the issues at stake?
4. In the contextual narrative above, what are some of the justice issues that need to be addressed by the Japanese government, which has just taken part in the G8 “declaration of prevention of sexual violence in conflict areas?”<sup>12</sup>
5. What type of justice would be “as much as she needs” to the surviving “comfort” women who have lived most of their lives in shame and denied dignity?
6. What about justice for those who died in their shame with no acknowledgement of their dehumanization?

Here at the Busan 10th assembly we can ask what concrete action churches can take together to make sure that all women who suffer sexual violence in conflict zones (DRC, Syria, Mali, Egypt, etc.) receive enough justice for the injustices that they have suffered. And we can consider further the sexual violence suffered by women and children in their homes, schools, churches, and other familiar places that are supposed to be sanctuaries of safety and nurture. (Statistics show that

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<sup>12</sup> *Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Areas* (UK: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2013). [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/185008/G8\\_PSVI\\_Declaration\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/185008/G8_PSVI_Declaration_-_FINAL.pdf).

the home has become one of the most dangerous places for women and girls, its mortality rate is second only to armed conflict areas.)

God is the standard of justice and therefore we need to seek God's standards for our communities through persistent prayers and advocacy for justice and peace.

When it comes to gender justice and women's rights, the same tenacity is always required, whether in the church or in the wider society. For often even in the most equitable society, women's rights are not part of the "as much as one needs." Yet God's standards for justice cover every person and creation, irrespective of gender, race, class, age, location, etc. So our prayer remains: God of life, lead us to justice and peace.