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One of the many things I've been intrigued with during the first two presidential debates is how Hillary Clinton, early on in the debates, referred viewers to her website for "real-time fact-checking" regarding the claims and counter-claims both she and Donald Trump were making. She said she's doing this to counter some of Trump's claims about himself and her, and because of time constraints during the debates, and I believe her. But of course, I also suspect she wishes to put her own "spin" on the so-called facts in question. Unless a candidate is simply lying outright—and no names need be mentioned here—when we check these so-called facts, what we usually learn is that context is everything. A seemingly damaging quote, action, or statistic can look very different when viewed in a wider context. Said differently, the *story* a candidate wants to tell is very hard to convey in sound bites and the give-and-take of debate accusations, and that's exactly what seems so hard to get across in today's media-driven politics—the story, in all its nuanced detail and depth.

Now, you may be wondering where I'm going with this. Well, it turns out that context, story, and even spin have everything to do with the point of Jesus' parable as we heard it read this morning from Luke's gospel. As with every parable recorded in the gospels, we need to separate the parable itself from the way its framed in the wider narrative setting of the gospel itself. We'll come back to Luke's framing of this parable in a moment; for now, let's look at the parable itself.

Jesus paints a brief, but vivid picture of a judge who, at best, lacks empathy and compassion for those who come before him for judgment, and, at worst, is corrupt. Jesus calls him “unjust.” And, indeed, he doesn’t seem at all concerned about justice for this poor woman who comes asking for a hearing against her opponent; all he seems concerned about is his own convenience and comfort. She is a widow—in her society at the time, she was among the most vulnerable—but, she is persistent. As I understand it, the courts in Jesus’ time worked much like our civil courts do today, regardless of whether the case was civil or criminal. Like the widow, the plaintiff brought a charge to a judge and, if the judge agreed to hear the case, told his or her story. The judge would then listen to the counter-claims of the defendant and, based on his evaluation of those stories, decide the case. Think of what happens in front of Judge Judy and we’ll get a pretty good idea of what this may have been like for this widow, except that Judge Judy, for all her edginess, really seems to care for the truth. The judge in this parable does not.

For the widow in such a situation, everything depended on, first, actually getting a hearing before the judge and, second, if she did manage to get a hearing, telling a persuasive story. If the judge was unwilling to take the case, or impatient in listening to a person who, like this poor widow, was not trained in rhetorical skills and who might tell a long and convoluted story, justice could be hard to find. This point is perhaps made more clearly in some of the earlier English translations of the Greek term that is here rendered as “justice.” Where in our translation the widow cries out to the judge, “Grant me justice...,” earlier translations have her saying, “Vindicate me...” To vindicate her would mean the

judge found her story more persuasive than her opponent's story, and would then rule in her favor (See N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p. 212).

We know how this story ends. The judge does not care about justice or her, but he did care for his sleep and his comfortable social position, maintained, we may suppose, by bribes that keep him in the style to which he had become accustomed. So, though the widow cannot, and perhaps would not, offer him a bribe, he rules on her case just to be rid of her. Jesus' point with this parable is revealed at the end of the parable in the contrast he sets up between the judge and God. He says, in effect, if a corrupt judge rules justly for the widow just to be rid of her, *how much more* will a loving God "grant justice to [or, again, vindicate] his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night."

But this concluding statement raises its own questions. Who are the chosen ones? What does it mean for God to vindicate them? And what do these questions have to do with how the parable is framed by Luke, who suggests this is a parable about praying always without getting discouraged? Luke, of course, is writing for his intended readers—likely, it is thought, for gentile Christians who may not have had an in-depth understanding of Jesus' Jewish roots. But, when Jesus first spoke the parable, it is likely that the "chosen ones" referred to his Jewish followers who were hoping his announcement of the kingdom of God would bring relief to their suffering under the Romans. They had come to expect that relief because of earlier stories that had been told for centuries about the God who would send a Messiah to restore the Davidic kingdom and bring the nations around them under their influence, that is, would reverse the relationship between them and Rome. In view of this earlier story, for them to be vindicated would mean that God had decided that this story would now come to its

conclusion—Rome would become a vassal of Jerusalem and God’s rule from Jerusalem would be recognized by the entire world. But, by the time Luke was writing, Jesus’ followers understood that Jesus had put a significantly different “spin” on the story the chosen people were telling themselves. Jesus evidently believed the kingdom of God was coming or, indeed, was already present, but that it would not come with violence. God would hear their cry, they would be vindicated, but not exactly as they expected or hoped.

At the end of the day, this parable and its framing by Luke in fact do raise questions about waiting on God to “vindicate” us by hearing and affirming our own stories. It also raises questions about the discouragement that sometimes sets in when God’s timing or God’s answer does not meet our expectations. I don’t doubt that all of us, at one time or another, have, like the widow, wanted desperately to be heard, to be noticed, by God, only to be disappointed. It is easy to get discouraged in such a situation. Jesus’ parable states that God does love and will hear us, but also, by implication, that God may not answer as or when we wish. It is God’s prerogative as God, I suppose, to put God’s own spin on *our* stories. This will surprise none of us, even if we wish God were sometimes...what shall we say, more responsive? But the parable also suggests that God may respond in ways we don’t expect and that, if we’re not observant, we may not even see it—that was the issue with Jesus’ own chosen ones. Jesus states that God loves us, and will indeed respond to our prayers and cries, but his parable as Luke frames it also suggests that showing some of the widow’s *hutzpah* when God doesn’t seem to be listening may not be the least bit out of place. Amen.