

October 16, 2022

One Woman Band of Holy Nagging

Psalm 119:97-104, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, Luke 18:1-8

The woman sounds like a “nag” to the judge. What an awful word. It even sounds bad when you say it out loud: “Nag!”

As soon as I said the word, I had this sinking feeling that I was going down a dark hole of destruction with no return. Some years ago, a man and his wife were riding with us to a local restaurant and the man started ranting about “women.” My wife’s eyes seemed to burn a hole in the back of his head. So, to defend a brother from wrath, I said to him, “If you have a reverse in that tongue, you should use it now.” Maybe I should take my own advice, but the widow in our story deserves to be heard and to be redeemed from the awful idea that she’s a nag.

Long ago, men got together in a quarterly business meeting and voted to label women as “nags.” A “nag” is an old, worn-out horse headed to the glue factory. A “nag” complains, scolds, complains, insists night and day. “Never lets a silence fall.” A nag torments, verbally abuses, finds fault constantly. She “nags” people to the point of anxiety, depression, or a mental breakdown.

You don’t think women gave each other the name “nag” do you? It’s a male creation. A label from a man’s world. Communication scholars tell us that for centuries women were inclined to do what was requested of them and many men were inclined to resist even the slightest hint that a woman is telling them what to do. Deborah Tannen, communication scholar in the conversational styles of women and men says, “A woman will repeat a request that doesn’t get a response because she is convinced her husband would do what she asks, if he only understood that she really wants him to do it.” But a man resists because he wants to avoid the feeling that he is following orders and therefore he waits to do what she asked. This is how women were first accused of being nags. Each time a woman repeats a request for a man to do something – take out the trash, paint the front porch, cut the grass, pick up some groceries – he again puts off fulfilling it. Therefore, in the man’s eyes the woman has become a nag (Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don’t Understand*).

This is why women created indirect speech acts. Instead of saying, “Turn up the thermostat, I’m cold,” a woman will ask, “Do you think it is cold in here?” The man, walks over to the wall, sets the thermostat on 71 degrees and returns to the sofa. The woman smiles, and says, “Thank you.” No one

was told what to do. No one was bossy. No one was nagging. Indirect speech acts save time, egos, energy, and are easy to translate.

This is contemporary background for our story about women, men, words, messages, communication. If a woman were to nag, it would be holy nagging. That's what happens in our story. A woman engages in holy nagging to get justice. Nagging is protest against injustice language.

A woman uses protest language to step on the last nerve of an unjust judge. The system of power doesn't like protest language: "Get my people go" doesn't appeal to Pharaoh. "Blessed are the poor" doesn't make sense to the rich.

Scholars label this the story of the unjust judge because that's how it has always been in our world. Why not call this the story of the powerful widow?

But Jesus wants us to see the widow who refuses to back down to the powers that would rule and destroy her. The widow cries, "**Grant me justice against my opponent.**" This always reminds me of the letter Abigail Adams sent to her husband on March 31, 1776: "I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."

God is on the widow's side. Miss that and you miss Luke's great reversal and it's not coming in the great by and by. It has already arrived. The judge is unjust because the system is unjust. An unjust system produces unjust persons.

Now this one-woman band of Holy Nagging widow prophetically mounts a campaign. This widow's farm may have been repossessed by the Law and on the way to Jerusalem she has stopped at the Temple and thrown her last two coins into the offering place, saying, "You might as well take these. It's all I had left." Same woman, same widow. The Temple and the Court, you see, were in cahoots – religion and politics. Didn't Jesus accuse the scribes of "devouring widows houses"? She stomps into the courtroom and refuses to shut up. Centuries of enforced silence, of "take it and keep your mouth shut" towered over her like a wall. Women pay such a price when they

Speak out and then we have the gall to wonder why they waited so long to speak. If a woman dares to accuse a man, a chorus of ignorant men would cry, "She was asking for it." Well, put this down. Women have been asking for justice forever; they have not been asking for mistreatment.

The judge was in on the fix with the gang devouring the houses of widows. Every morning when the judge takes the bench, there's the widow. She was clinging to the rock that the courts of unjust judges and the gates of hell can't budge. Some Christians have a narrow view of the gates of hell as if they are only the entrance to some mythological eternal place. Well, the gates of hell are wherever there is oppression. The gates of hell are the front doors of any institution or corporation that abuses women, denigrates their value, and refuses to give them equal pay for equal work. The church can't wait until eternity to take on the gates of hell. We have to destroy those gates now and set all God's people free. We are the people called to shout, "Let my people go!" at the gates of hell. We are the people charged with marching around the citadels of oppression, blowing our trumpets, until the gates and walls of hell come tumbling down.

Now the unjust judge is down for the ten-count. What he has done with such certainty and authority is finished. The widow turns the judge into a quivering, whining, Jell-O-judge: He complains, "In the end, she may wear me out." Of course, the judge cries, "Why's everyone always picking on me?" This is how people who are unjust respond when the truth is told. They whine.

All those who abuse power should know that you shouldn't mess with one of God's widows. They are a protected class. Don't mess with God's protected ones: widows, orphans, aliens, the poor. I'm trying to tell you: **DON'T MESS WITH GOD'S PROTECTED ONES.**

The gospel offers a counter truth to the secular truth of politics. It is a truth carried by non-experts. We have seen the official truth do its dirty work in the unjust judge. We have heard the counter truth of prophets, widows, and Jesus. This truth subverts official truth. And this is why the church must now desert its wasted attempt to suck up to secular political power. Our precious words are the words of mercy and justice. The words that are as sweet as honey are the words of mercy and justice.

The time is right and ripe for more holy nagging against unholy injustice! Let the voices of the unfairly treated be heard, loud and clear! God will hear and God will be just! Amen.