

Lk. 18:1-8 | Our Persistent Widows | Jon Brooks

I. Jasmina

May, 1997. I was teaching ESL in Krakow, Poland. I had enough money left for one more reckless adventure before returning home to King City. The Adriatic heat was sweltering and I was stiff from the 4 hour bus ride from Tuzla to Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. I was seated beside the only other native English speaker on the bus. He was with *Doctors Without Borders*, part of an international team of forensic scientists there to identify the remains found in the mass graves at Srebrenica. His last words to me were: “kid, if you leave this place with more answers than questions, you’ll have learned nothing.”

By May ‘97, as far as the rest of the world was concerned, civil war in Bosnia was over, but in truth, the place was still very much a hot spot: a UN sponsored military state keeping everyone, already traumatized, on edge and in a state of precarious peace. You had to make sure you stayed on the roads and sidewalks as the land mines were still everywhere. I remember leaving the bus station and looking around at the carnage, at the end of civilization, at the end of hope for humanity, and my first thought was, I don’t think I’m finding a Ritz Carlton 5 Star Executive Suite tonight! Three bathrooms. Fitness room. Whirlpool.

The night before I slept on a park bench in the safest spot I could find: beside a Spanish tank. Thankfully, my *Doctors Without Borders* friend gave me a tip: he said, when you exit the station, you’ll see lots of lone women waiting outside—they’ll all be smiling and competing for your attention. They are *not* prostitutes: they’re looking for media, Red Cross, UN personnel—anyone with cash who needs housing. That’s where I met Jasmina.

I spoke two hundred words of very bad Polish and Jasmina had 500 words of recently practiced English. That is to say, we communicated perfectly. She showed me all over Sarajevo. I remember her explaining to me why the white limestone graves were all over city parks, bus stops, backyards, front

yards, avenue medians—everywhere graves. She'd say, "no room, no room, no room! We have space for no more dead."

To understand the siege of Sarajevo we need to make a cup with their hands and imagine in the middle is this pluralist and proud host of the 1984 Winter Olympics. Sheltered *and* betrayed by the mountains—depending on the century, mountains can be a shield or a weapon. In the 90s, the snipers lived in the hills and the mountains became weapons. Even beauty can be weaponized. Sometimes, the snipers would randomly aim at high-rise buildings at the foot of the mountains. The city didn't stand a chance. Strangely, too, as if to mock the ugliness of the human beast's capacity for fear and violence, Bosnia's natural beauty is astonishing; it is a holy place, the opposite of godlessness. I digress.

Jasmina lived on the 22nd floor of a brutalist housing project just at the foot of these mountains at the edge of Sarajevo. I remember the kitchen windows were in the process of being replaced. Taped plastic tarps, whipping in the wind were all that separated us from a jumper's dream.

There are such things as stupid questions. And at the time, I was 28 years-old and certain about enough things to have a boundless capacity for stupid questions.

"Where's your husband?" I asked. Stupid question number one.

"A few years ago, he was doing the dishes, glass exploded everywhere!" She nodded toward the plastic sheets. "He hated doing dishes." She laughed. "Then my father moved in to help take care of my son and I. My father helped replace that glass, too. He insisted."

"Where's your dad?" Stupid question number two.

"About 6 months or so ago, he wanted to help with the dishes. He insisted." So this was Jasmina, a Bosnian war widow; a *persistent widow*: a symbol of hope in the face of hopelessness.

II. Our Persistent Widows

I won't dwell too much on the unjust judge. We know who he is: generally speaking, the unjust judge is the structure responsible for all manner of oppression: sexism, racism, classism, corporatism, ableism, ageism, colonialism—whatever other fear based *ism* you can think of that dehumanizes the individual, that dismisses the sacred value of every living creature. You may prefer to consider the unjust judge as *the Law*. The laws that give us status as citizens or the laws that deny us status as refugees.

But back to Jasmina, the persistent widow, who I think represents something we all can relate to today: *hope in the face of hopelessness*. How do we find hope in a world that gives us so little to be hopeful about? How do we find hope in a world wherein two police officers are called to a home and met with an SKS automatic assault weapon? On such days we have to remind ourselves: *hope is a verb*. Or, more precisely: hope is borne of good action.

You know, I thought I had a grip on this slippery parable. I think it's part of the beauty of Scripture: that it is *eternal*. What do I mean by that? Scripture is *endlessly* readable; its interpretive possibilities change with every generation, even every individual reading. No matter how often you read it, it's new every time. When I thought I was done writing this sermon, I realized all too late: there are problems with this story of Jasmina as a contemporary persistent widow. First of all, Jasmina was clearly *not* without personal autonomy and agency. In ancient Roman Palestine—almost 2000 years ago—a widow was far and away, *the most vulnerable person in that particular community*. To suggest that a widow, today, is the *most vulnerable* person in King City should not only offend any self-respecting feminist, such a comparison should make my Siamese cat laugh! Ever seen a cat laugh? Cats do not laugh. In contrast, the only time a dog is not laughing or telling us how much he loves us, is when he's eating or sleeping. Cats don't laugh. They're too busy beaming our data back up to their home

planet. I digress. I think a better reading of the persistent widow today might begin with the question: who among *us* are the *most vulnerable*? Who are *our* persistent widows?

The 20 year old Ukrainian war widow, Yana Shkliaruk, denied boarding on a connecting flight to Canada all because her 20 month-old baby's visa was stamped on her mother's passport by accident—Yana is a persistent widow. So, yes, there are literal persistent widows just as there are unjust judges in the form of legalist border officials in our age. But I prefer to read the persistent widow metaphorically: I prefer to read the persistent widow *as any soul on the margins*. The refugee without legal status, for example. The racialized, the unhoused, the sick, the dying, those with disabilities—who, by the way, are not so much disabled so much as their inaccessible surroundings *make* them disabled.

III. The Actions of Being *For* and Being *With*

Which brings us back to the question of hope in the face of hopelessness and from where does hope spring? I have no certain answer. But let's consider the first line of Luke 18 again: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." *Pray always and not to lose heart*. But what kind of prayer brings justice to the marginalized? This is where I think it is helpful to consider the word, 'Pray,' as a verb. *To pray* is an action. Hope is a verb.

By my lights, this suggests that *effective* hopes and prayers are found *and cultivated* in action, in our own active participation within our own communities; hope is in the morally decisive *action* of helping others, the morally decisive *action* of helping the stranger—as Jasmina helped me. It is also the difference between *being for* those persistent widows on the margins justice and *being with* those persistent widows on the margins.

So, what counts as active hope? Liking and promoting an *Animal Justice Facebook* page? Retweeting a Rumi quote? Such are actions, yes, but they are actions wherein we are *being for* good action. I believe there is a higher action of hope and prayer available to *all of us* and that is the action of

being with those on the margins; *being with* those in their grief; *being with* those in their loneliness; *being with* those in their illness. I'm gonna go out on a limb here and suggest that whatever can be done in pajamas — is something less than active hope. Active prayer. Active faith.

And in the same manner that hope requires our active participation, *faith in God* — and *whatever* that means to you: whether it be the 'guy in the sky;' or God as that *wellspring of trust* between strangers; or maybe you consider God as that place where forgiveness and mercy lives; or maybe you prefer the beauty and simplicity of understanding God as *love* - whomever or whatever is *your* God: your faith asks of you some kind of *practiced action*.

What does active hope and active prayer look like?

Justice moves an inch an hour and by the hands of *just judges* that we persistently lobby through our elected representatives. Justice happens when laws are written—or rewritten—that humanize those on the margins. Refugee statuses need to change. They are sacred human beings standing *right in front of us* and yet the law refuses to see them. That is to say, *active hope and active prayer* may look like a letter written to your MP—you don't need me to list further examples. I'm more interested in the idea that hope and faith and prayer are muscles that need exercising: ever known a long distance runner to not run regularly? A church pianist who doesn't play piano regularly? A hopeful person with faith is the same: their hope, their faith is regularly practiced. It's okay to click 'like' on FB, to change one's Twitter avatar to announce to social media what kind of justice or politics we are for. *As long* as we realize that *being for* something is not entirely what we are called upon as a Christian moral community to do. The community that is founded on the teachings of Jesus is predicated on something greater. We must be *with* the persistent widow; we must be *with* our persistent widows on the margins; we must, in some manner, be *with those refugees not yet legally visible*—"*whether the time is favorable or unfavorable*" (2 Ti. 4:2).

Before I conclude, I want to give you one very small, very easy example of active hope. It's not a heroic example by any stretch of the imagination, but I think it's worth mentioning. I used to think, mistakenly, that wearing an orange t-shirt on September 30 was just a passive expression of *being for* indigenous justice and reconciliation—another version of pajama wearing *slacktivism*. I was wrong. When you walk the streets of Toronto wearing an orange tee shirt, the indigenous *persistent widows will* see you, and they *will* smile because they immediately feel less alone. Why? Because in that smiling moment between us and those who've suffered all manner of traumatic injustice and racism—in that ephemeral moment of grace: we are not just *being for* a better world: we are *being with* those on the margins, those who've *not* been seen, those who are persistent widows.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, as I read this, there are currently 89.3 million forcibly displaced sacred human individuals in the world today.¹ Not a hopeful statistic. But when I hear such stats, I try to recall how Jasmina found hope through her *active* generosity of spirit. Her *active* participation in helping strangers, in doing whatever she could to make sure her son had a safe home. Jasmina's hope was not abstract. Jasmina's faith and hope was strengthened by her *active* participation in the world, her *being with* others who needed help.

Justice is slow. Many of the seeds of active hope and faith we plant today will not flower in our lifetime. Not all seeds germinate and flower. Perhaps in time they will. May we be a seed of active hope dying for a new fruit to grow. Amen.

¹ "Figures At A Glance," UNHCR.org, accessed October 12, 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>



Photo of Jasmina by Jon Brooks, May 1997, Sarajevo.