

Chutzpah

1 Samuel 17:28-37

Luke

Word Origin & History

chutzpah

1892, from Yiddish *khutspe* "impudence, gall" from Heb. *hutspah*. The classic definition is that given by Leo Rosten (a writer and humorist who wrote several books on the meaning of Yiddish terms): "that quality enshrined in a man who, having killed his mother and father, throws himself on the mercy of the court because he is an orphan."

Once there was a receptionist who was fired from her job because of her weight problem. She took her boss to court, but the judge was unsympathetic and voted against her. From that moment on, she hounded the judge, demanding justice. She sent emails, she called his office, she made appointments—she even came to his house. Finally, he granted her appeal and found in her favor, saying to himself, "I will never have a moments' peace until I give this woman what she wants."

This is a strange parable, especially if we try to interpret it as an allegory—that is, as a story where one object or one person represents one idea or person. Most of us have been taught to look at parables that way—for example, the father in the parable of the prodigal son is God, while we might be represented by the prodigal, or his elder brother. A one to one correspondence. But that kind of interpretation doesn't work here. Is God the uncaring judge? A judge who only gives justice because to do otherwise is inconvenient for him? John Dominic Crossan, one of the Jesus scholars and someone who likes to look at the teachings of Jesus in their historical context, calls the allegorical approach to parables "totally inadequate" (*In Parables-The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, 7). Allegory is too simplistic an approach to a series of stories that vary in their approach and in their complexity. In fact, the gospel writer, Luke himself, is not entirely sure what to do with this parable, and places it in the category of a "how much more" story—if this judge will give justice, then how much more will God.

Crossan teaches us to look at parables the way we would poetry—symbolism and metaphor are at play here, which means that the doors of interpretation are opened for us, and, while we are bound by what is actually present in the parable, we can also begin to look for strings of meaning. Today, I will submit to you that this is a parable about "chutzpah." Are you familiar with this word, "chutzpah?" Say it with me---chutzpah. It is a Yiddish word—Yiddish is what you get when you move Middle Eastern speakers of Hebrew into Europe. You get a lingua franca among the Jewish people of Europe that is filled with "ch" sounds and "z" sounds and "oy givalt!" It's lyrical and expressive and intentionally witty. Leo Rosten, the writer and humorist who wrote several books about Yiddish, defines the word "chutzpah" this way: he says it is "that quality enshrined in a man who, having killed his mother and father, throws himself on the mercy of the court

because he is an orphan.” It’s an action that makes people say, “Well! Of all the nerve!” or “You have some nerve!” or “How dare you!” I submit to you today that this parable is part of an ongoing pattern in the Bible calling us to chutzpah. In this parable you get a woman who goes outside the boundaries of what is socially acceptable in order to get justice—you can picture the way she is treated by the judge’s secretary, by the people walking by her in the halls of justice, by the judge’s wife. Her disregard for those social norms is, at least in part, the point of the parable. Jesus is saying to his followers, “Don’t let some social niceties keep you from relationship with the one true God, for heaven’s sake!” And this is not the first time this comes up in the Bible.

Think of David. Now, we would all agree that the boy is courageous, and we’re pretty fine with that. David is a heroic figure in the Bible and in Jewish history—it is during his reign and that of his son, Solomon, that Israel got its only taste, brief though it was, of independence until the middle of the 20th century. What we don’t generally address is how socially unacceptable were his actions. Picture this—one of our young high school boys—one of them makes the trip to Washington, DC and somehow finagles a meeting with President Obama. While he’s there, he says to the President, “Sir, I know how to catch Osama Bin Laden. Give me permission to go and do it.” What’s your reaction? It’s not really pride, is it? The instinct would be to step in and say, “Mr. President, I’m so sorry—he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Please forgive him.” You’d drag the kid away, with admonitions not to waste the time of powerful people. The emotion? Embarrassment. You don’t say ridiculous things like that to the President of the United States! How humiliating.

Look at what David’s brother says to him—he accuses him of shirking his duties with the sheep and calls him “conceited” and “wicked” (1 Samuel 17:28). This is not socially acceptable, what David is proposing. It’s showing off—dangerously—leaving aside what you’re supposed to be doing to do the job someone else was hired to do. The living gall of it, the unmitigated temerity—how dare he? And when David steps out onto the battlefield, with no armor, no sword, no size or history of defeating giants in battle, you can bet that his brothers are not cheering him on—they are covering their eyes, shaking their heads, and mentally planning how they will explain his death to their father and deciding who will get his sheepskin bedroll. No one thinks he can do this—not his family, not the other soldiers, not his king, and certainly not Goliath. Goliath mocks him openly, and takes David’s presence as an insult. David confronts Goliath without armor, without sword or javelin--and now listen to David’s reply to the taunts of the giant:

You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give all of you into our hands. 1 Samuel 17:45-47

What arrogance, what nerve, to stand and spout this off in front of a man over nine feet tall, capable of carrying 140 pounds of armor and weaponry. But look carefully at the seat of David's arrogance—his boast is not for himself, it is for the Lord. This is David's major achievement—not that he was merely brave in battle, but that he had the nerve to invoke the name of the Lord, the gall to believe that God cared what happened to God's people, and the chutzpah to act on that belief. This theme is also a common one in Paul's letters—he quite often says that, while he has room to boast in himself, his only real boast is that he is the adopted child of the one God through Jesus Christ.

So here is the thing—we are called to chutzpah, to nerve. First, we are called to have the nerve to stand in the face of the God of the universe and ask for that which we would have. Sometimes I feel like the entire Christian church is like a Southern woman, standing in the background, going, “No, it's fine. Don't mind me. I'm all right. I don't need a thing,” when in truth we need a great deal! We're not called to be fine, or to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune quietly. We're told, in no uncertain terms, that God cares for us, and we are to ask for that which we need. Last week Dr. Causey raised some excellent points about requests that go unanswered, which cannot be dealt with in a single sermon or a single conversation. But I will say this—whether we understand the answers or not, we are instructed to ask. And we are instructed to expect the God who created the whole universe to respond to us, individually and personally.

We are called to chutzpah, as well, in what we offer to the world. We have heard today from those who could have spent their time and money elsewhere this summer, but chose to go where the world needed them. I have to admit that allowing my teenaged daughter to go to Overtown in Miami, a place of great need and poverty, was difficult. Those teenagers and the adults who accompanied them dared to go into a place where the welcome is fraught with need and anxiety. How difficult it must have been, also, for Doug Hammond to send his family off to Africa; how daring for the Packmans and Carol Logan to step into so much need in Ecuador. Even here at home, there is the daring of the young couples of Hyaets, who stepped into a community where they had no guarantee of being welcomed or effective; there is the daring of the UBA Bible School, which became a partnership with Freedom School, where we step briefly into the lives of children whose needs are great and complex. There is the audacity of driving into the parking lot of the homeless shelter, and stepping in among a transient population of men, and serving their needs for an hour or two. I have some missionary friends who have felt called to serve the deaf population in Hungary. Whenever I mention them, I can see in people's faces the same thought I had when they first told me what they were going to do. The Hungarian deaf? Really? And do you know one of the primary methods they use to serve the people in Hungary? Baseball. Doug coaches baseball. Amazing, creative—audacious-

And there is this: there is the nerve, the temerity, the gall, to say to a friend, a co-worker, a person in need—“I know a better way.” We have been carefully taught here at St. John's and we do not like to judge. But I would say to you today that there is a difference between passing judgment—saying to someone, “You are wrong,” or “You are bad,” and making the judgment call that the person you are with has a need that only God can fill. While we would not say to the person of a different faith, “Your faith is a mistake and

you should change your ways to mine,” we can say to the person in despair, “I have good news for you.” We can say to the person dependant on substances to get by, “There is peace to be had through a faith in God.” We can say to the one seeking futilely to find security from the stock market or the housing market, “There is a place to find security and peace.” We’re called to seek out the social leper, to speak to the outcasts, to remind those in power of the need for justice. We are called to invoke the name of Jesus—Jesus as model, Jesus as teacher, Jesus as healer, Jesus as peace-maker, Jesus as rabble-rouser, Jesus as radical, Jesus as Lord.

Leo Rosten wrote something else that can be helpful to us today. He said, “I cannot think that the purpose of life is to be happy. I think the purpose of life is to be useful, to be responsible, to be compassionate. It is, above all, to matter, to count, to stand for something, to have made some difference that you lived at all.” This is an excellent call for Christians—the endless pursuit of happiness, at least as we Americans define it, is both exhausting and elusive—instead of mere happiness, Jesus offers abundant life—meaningful, full, complex, significant. In order to get it, we’re required to have some chutzpah, to step out of our comfort zones. To be like the USS Enterprise and boldly go, to be like the apostle Paul and boldly speak, to be like these, our missionaries, and boldly serve.

The woman in the parable, which is generally called the Parable of the Persistent Widow, dares to approach an unapproachable, powerful figure in her pursuit of justice. She flouts both social and civil laws as she attempts to win her case and risks making a fool of herself, at the very least. The Christian faith is a risky business, and it calls us beyond the mores of high school where we sit with the most popular group we possibly can; it calls us beyond the precepts of the business world, where we scramble for advancement on the heads of whoever is in our way; it calls us beyond the message of the entertainment world that we should all want to be movie stars. What it calls us to is the courage to stand before God and ask for what we need; it calls us to the nerve to speak a word of justice to the powerful; it calls us to reach out, reach down, and pull up next to us those who have fallen behind. We’re called to believe, to really, truly believe, and that is always going to take a good bit of chutzpah.