

Remembering Ron

Based on Elizabeth Evans CC Sept 1/22

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Luke 18:1-8 by Patty Friesen October 16/22

Our gospel reading this morning heavily depends on the social status and religious duties involved in the roles of judges and widows. In ancient Israel, the duty of a judge was to maintain harmonious relations and adjudicate disputes between Israelites. Widows were deprived of the support of a husband, yet they could not inherit their husband's estate, which passed on to the deceased man's sons or brothers, so disputes involving widows and orphans were common.

Judges were charged with the responsibility of hearing complaints fairly and impartially, a duty that was all the more important because they adjudicated cases without the benefit of a jury. Deuteronomy reports Moses' charge to judges: "Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's" (Deut 1:16-17 NRSV). The judge's responsibility within the covenant community, therefore, was to declare God's judgment and establish shalom among God's people.

The expectation regarding the care of widows was equally clear. Regard for those in need—among whom the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner were classic examples—was grounded in God's mercy on the Israelites when they were in bondage (Deut 24:17-18). God will vindicate the widows and the orphans. Therefore, those who abuse such powerless persons will surely suffer God's judgment (Num 22:22-24; cf. Ps 68:5).

Widows had a place of honour in the early church also. Following the Hebrew Scriptures, James declares that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (Jas 1:27 NRSV). In this light, the prominence of widows in Luke and Acts takes on added significance. Anna, the widow who blessed the infant Jesus, “never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:37). During his address at Nazareth at the outset of his ministry, Jesus recalled Elijah’s ministry to the widow in Sidon (4:25-26). Elijah provided her with meal and oil and then revived her son and presented him to her alive (1 Kgs 17:8-24). The commentary on Jesus’ raising of the widow of Naan’s son in Luke 7:11-17 calls attention to the connections between Luke’s account of that event and Elijah’s resuscitation of the widow’s son.

18:2. The judge is introduced—a certain judge in a certain city. This situation is either hypothetical or deliberately non-specific. All attention is focused on the characterization of this judge, “who neither feared God nor had respect for people.” In the light of the requirements and expectations for judges, quoted above, the point is obvious: This judge is completely unfit for his position. 18:3. This verse introduces the widow. Her grievance is not described, however, so it is usually assumed that she is calling upon the judge to make a third party give her what is owed to her—a matter of money or property. Neither does the parable tell us why the judge refuses to hear her case. Interpreters have conjectured that the judge may be waiting for a bribe, or that he may be responding to the widow’s more powerful adversary, hoping to curry his favor. In either case, the judge’s motive is unimportant; his refusal to hear the widow confirms Jesus’ characterization of him as one who has no fear of God or regard for others. We

may assume that the widow has a legitimate grievance. The judge is her sole hope of securing justice, and persistence is her only recourse.

Now the surprise comes in the judge's soliloquy or interior monologue. Interior monologues are a favourite device in the peculiarly Lukan parables (see the rich fool, 12:17-19; the prodigal son, 15:17-19; the dishonest steward, 16:3-4). We are not actually told that the judge granted the widow's request, only that he decided to do so. 18:6. The unjust judge, from whom one could hardly expect justice, finally does what is right—if only to keep from being badgered by the persistent widow. The just God does not protect the property interests of the privileged but is compassionate and looks out for those who have no power to leverage privileges from the powerful. The way of the kingdom, therefore, calls for priorities based on compassion.

Ron Sider was an advocate for faith expressed in action and compassion. A white, male evangelical who embraced the voices of the marginalized and made abundant room in leadership for new generations and for people of colour. A champion for peacemaking both when wars were popular and when they were unpopular. A scholar who didn't flee to the suburbs but raised his family in one of Philadelphia's less privileged zip codes. The consensus of many friends and former colleagues is that Ron Sider, who died July 27 at age 82, lived what he professed. The founder of Evangelicals for Social Action (now Christians for Social Action) and professor of theology and public policy at Eastern University was one of the most prominent public faces of a progressive evangelical movement that saw no daylight between evangelism and justice.

"Ron was one of those unique people whose words, actions, and character were all consistent," said Heidi Unruh, who worked with Sider both at Evangelicals for Social

Action—an organization, now called Christians for Social Action, which Sider founded in 1978—and as a co-author and speaker.

“Ron never compromised his theological beliefs,” said Tony Campolo, professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University in Philadelphia. The two became friends when the Sider family moved into a largely Black, economically disadvantaged section of the city. “It wasn’t just an academic perception of the Bible. It was living out his beliefs [in a way] that became a model for many of us,” Campolo said.

Raised in a Canadian Brethren in Christ family, Sider was one of the authors of the 1973 “Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern,” which called for rejecting economic materialism, inequality, militarism, and sexism. At the time, said Philadelphia-based activist and author Shane Claiborne, there were lots of people doing justice work. It just wasn’t rooted in faith in scripture. “I think that’s where Ron was really unique,” said Claiborne. “He was primarily motivated by his faith and deeply grounded in scripture,” enabling him to have an impact among Christians who saw the New Testament Jesus as their primary authority.

A prodigious writer, Sider authored or co-authored more than 30 books. His 1977 book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* has gone through six editions since its publication, influencing generations of readers. “I think he was really someone that wanted to redeem and rehabilitate what evangelicalism is and what the movement stands for,” said Adam Russell Taylor, president of Sojourners. “It pained him that it became so hijacked by an ideological agenda and a religious right [agenda] that ultimately became a kind of commitment to Trumpism.”

Sider's concern for social justice was rooted in the Anabaptist, rural, Canadian identities of his younger years. In his book *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, Swartz outlines how Sider helped launch the Evangelical Environmental Network, which in the early 1990s raised \$1 million to give to efforts to preserve the Endangered Species Act. Later, EEN launched a high-profile *What Would Jesus Drive?* campaign that urged Christians to think about their car's fuel consumption.

Sider always had a global perspective. Sider and his colleagues had a power that came precisely from speaking from the margins, he said. While it's not easy to be a prophetic voice, Sider wasn't one of the grumpy ones. He did hold out hope and his hope was really rooted in the goodness of God. What will Sider's friends and colleagues miss the most? His ability to learn deeply from "the margins and the global church," said Toyama-Szeto. "It's this expansive, global Christian community in which God reveals Godself. A White man working with members of the international community and those who were marginalized—he didn't do it in a condescending way," she said. "I think he was eager . . . to learn." "I miss his voice in the world," said Unruh. "There was something so distinctive about the way he thought, so trustworthy about the way he wrote and spoke."

Claiborne said he would miss "that spiritual grounding" of Sider's "that is not at all afraid of doubts and questions but that really, unashamedly, can name the things that are true." While Sider is often called a leading light of the evangelical left, he thinks that categorization misses the heart of Sider's legacy.

"In my experience, it was never about the left or the right with Ron, whether theologically or politically," he said. "Rather, it was about following the Jesus of the

Bible, faithfully and completely—wherever that led and whatever the cost. His lasting impact on me is the great blessing to have seen and known someone of humble and childlike faith, who loved Jesus, lived for Jesus, and hoped in Jesus, and is now forever with Jesus.”

In the spirit of Jesus, as we join together in communion, let us pray the pledge of love in our Voices Together hymnal #937 and then we will move over to our communion liturgy in #941.