Following Jesus’ way means looking at life in a new way. This is one of the reasons Jesus used parables to teach his disciples. A parable is a story that surprises or shocks us. A parable challenges our assumptions.

We would be very happy if life was simple. But life is not simple. There are good parts and bad parts. There are beautiful parts and terrible parts of life. Life is complicated and messy, like a pan of lasagna. Life has many layers. This is the second reason Jesus used parables to teach his disciples. Parables are short but they are not simple. Parables can be seen from many different angles, like a parabola. Parables have complicated layers of meaning and truth.

I’m guessing you have heard Jesus’ parable of the widow and the judge at least once or twice before. Even if you are like me and have heard this parable ten or twenty times before, we need to keep listening and try to hear the story in a new way. We try to hear new layers of meaning in the story. Let’s hear the story again, and listen for some new understandings.

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. We are supposed to be shocked by this opening statement. If we are no longer surprised by the idea that there is a judge who does not have respect for the people then we have very big problems. Cynical people might say, ‘all judges are corrupt’. That is a lie. There are corrupt judges and honorable judges. There are politicians who are looking out for their own interests and politicians who are looking out for the interests of the people.

We expect our judges to be people who have respect, or fear, of God. Respect for God and God’s creation is the foundation of respect for people as those created by God in the image of God. So the first layer of meaning in the parable is about the shocking context for the story. We rightly expect judges to be honorable people who fear God and respect people, but once in a while we will come across someone in a position of honor and authority who acts with total lack of honor and respect for others. The parable is true because every once in a while life throws a nasty curve ball in our direction.

We discover a second layer if we spend some time thinking about the widow. In that city there was a widow. In this second layer we might begin by asking, ‘what does a widow look like?’ In a minute we can go back and think about this from Jesus’ perspective, but let’s begin by thinking about today. What do widows look like today? Are all widows old? Are all widows poor? Are all widows weak? Are all widows women?

I’m a widow. I certainly was a widow, and in some way I will always consider myself to be a widow. Being a widow is not all bad. Most widows I know have had some extra experience in life, and some of that experience can lead to powerful insights about life.

There are lots of widows and lots of different kinds of widows. As Jesus tells the parable we begin to leave behind a certain simple, monolithic idea of what it means to be a widow. Maybe that’s why there are so many stories about widows in the Bible. Maybe that’s why widows play important roles in the stories Jesus tells and in the stories we tell about Jesus. In Jesus’ time there was an assumption that widows were powerless or weak. In this second layer we begin to question our assumptions about this very large group of people, a group many of us will join someday, called widows.

We discover a third layer of questions as we consider the actions of the widow. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to the judge and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ Who is the opponent? What is the conflict? We are not sure whether the widow wants her opponents to be thrown into jail or whether she was forced out of her house by relatives of her deceased husband and is fighting for a place to live. This widow has the time and energy to
repeatedly go to the judge’s quarters and make her case. Is this widow rich and powerful? In this third layer we see that the widow is relentless; she uses all of the power she has in an attempt to reach her goal.

We examine the fourth and last layer in the actions of the judge. For a while the judge refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ The judge gave up. The judge granted the woman some sort of justice even though the judge did not change in character.

Amy Jill Levine makes the point that the judge might actually be afraid of this widow. That would be an unexpected turn in the story. Levine notes that the language of the original text uses words from the world of boxing. In Levine’s translation the judge is worried that this widow is going to give him a black eye. I’ve known one or two widows who were quite capable of giving someone a black eye.

So Jesus’ parable is not simple. The status and behavior of the judge and the widow are unexpected, even shocking. We expect the judge to be an honorable character; he is not. We expect the widow to be weak or at least reserved; she is not. We don’t know exactly what the widow was asking of the judge, we only know that she was relentless. She was relentless and, by the end of the story, the judge was either exhausted or afraid for his safety.

Luke makes a claim for a simple message for this parable. According to Luke, Jesus told his disciples the parable of the widow and the judge because he wanted them to pray always and not lose heart. Luke is not wrong about this. But Jesus’ message is more complex and more powerful.

All of us are like the widow, or will be like the widow, at some point in our lives. At some point there will be a struggle for each one of us. On top of that, there will be some sort of curveball in the mix. There will be a judge who does not respect God or people. There will be a doctor who makes a big mistake. There will be a trusted friend or relative who betrays us. That is merely the setting for the messy, complicated story of life.

In this complicated story of life, the widow is our hero. The widow has a clear understanding of what is right that is based on justice. The widow knows the next piece in the journey of life that is essential for her to survive. The widow is fierce in some way, to the point that the judge is afraid of her. The widow is relentless in pursuit of her goal.

Luke is right that we need to pray always and not lose heart, but Jesus gives us this parable because we need more than prayer. Prayer alone is not enough. The parable teaches us that the first thing we need is a clear understanding of what is right and what is wrong. We need to stay focused on what is truly important. Amid the complications and difficulties of life, you and I have to be passionate about our mission. Our passion does not need to be loud. We don’t need to be threatening the judge with a black eye, but we cannot give up. You and I have to be relentless.

Some of the leaders of the church who followed Luke try to make things simple. It is bizarre that some people who claim to be following Jesus seem to have only one response to any challenge or tragedy: prayer. Jesus never said that. Jesus never acted that way. Jesus prayed and Jesus did a lot more than pray.

Jesus was fully engaged in the struggle and complexity of the life we live: the work, the arguments, the sickness, the healing, the tragedies, the joy and the need for rest. When it was time to teach his disciples, Jesus told them parables.

Real life is complicated. Don’t be discouraged. When life gets complicated take a minute to say a prayer, but know you will need more than prayers. When life gets complicated think about the complicated sort of life Jesus lived alongside us. When life gets complicated think about the parables Jesus gave us.

Pray, but do more than pray. Be relentless. Be like the widow. Don’t give up. Be passionate in your quest for justice.