

“Not Losing Heart”

Luke 18:1-8

21 October 2007

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Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he 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.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Prayer.

Our Gospel for this morning, unique to St. Luke, grants the careful disciple insight into a closer walk with God; a deeper and more fertile life lived with the Spirit, even in the midst of chronic pain and suffering.

It’s context was a question about the Kingdom of God, which Jesus answers with a series of teaching moments about the Son of Man. It is in this setting, of Kingdom discussions and Jesus speaking about the coming of the Son of Man, that we must view today’s passage.

Many generations had passed by the time the Gospel of Luke was transferred from the Oral Tradition into the first written texts. Those editors searched and found in the original Oral Tradition original source material, over-looked by other Gospel authors, which spoke to their contemporary situation.

It was the end of the first century, nearly 70 years since the ministry of Jesus, his Passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. Nearly 70 years the faithful had waited, patiently waited for the return of the Son of Man, just as Jesus had promised.

They were enduring persecution, the victims of genocide, and exile. Jerusalem had been leveled and burned. Only small, secretive communities of disciples remained, and they were scattered across the Mediterranean basin, and as far east as India. House churches started by Paul, Peter, Silas, Timothy, John, and remnants from the apostles Matthew, Mark, and Luke, among others, waited, and suffered in silence and anonymity. Daily, martyrs were dying ... for no other reason than they followed Jesus.

Pray always and do not lose heart.

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So Jesus teaches us this morning, in a safe manner, using parable, about the importance of praying always and not losing heart. This parable is not a simile; the unjust judge is not a proxy for God. He didn't fear God or respect the people. Rather, this is a story created by Jesus to teach us about the persistent woman. She doesn't grow weary. She doesn't stop coming. She kept bothering him. She cries to him day and night.

Slowly, but steadily, she chips away at the judge's resolve.

This is a story similar to Aesop's tale of the Tortoise and the Hare, where the slow, but faithful and persistent is the one rewarded.

It is a story that causes us to recall 9th grade earth science, when the teacher had us create a geological time line, spacing out significant world events proportionately. The last task was to consider the length of time human kind has been involved and to place it appropriately on the time line. We are just a little sliver, in the history of the world, and an one life span is a fraction of that sliver. Humbling, isn't it? How small and insignificant each of us can appear to be.

In the second letter of Peter we read "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." It continues, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:8-9 NRSV)

In the text before us, the disciples are told to continue in sustained faithfulness in their prayer for the coming of the kingdom. In addition they are assured that the time of waiting and of persecution is near an end. God "will vindicate them speedily." (verse 8)¹

Pray always and do not lose heart.

Sometimes, we find ourselves in crisis. And in the presence of our emotions we make mistakes. Sometimes we ask the wrong question: Instead of asking "why me?" perhaps the question should be "what is God's will?"

An initial premise in Dietrich Bonhoeffer book "Ethics" is not the conventional wisdom which states that our purpose is "to do good." Rather, this victim of concentration camps states that it is the Christian's purpose "to do the will of God." Sometimes we have the wrong premise.

In an earlier piece from Luke, we read "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'"²

¹ Craddock, F., et. al., Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C, After Pentecost, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1986, p.213.

² Luke 17:20-21 NRSV

So, perhaps we have the question wrong. Maybe the question shouldn't be "when will the Son of Man return," rather, it should be the really crucial one posed by Jesus; the Son of Man is coming to vindicate his people, but who are his people? Will those apparently so interested in the end times and the reversal of fortunes be faithfully committed to Christ up until the end? Will the Son of Man actually find faith among us?³

"He who endures to the end will be saved."⁴

Pray always and do not lose heart.

Jesus tells his disciples to ask, seek, and knock at his door. He tells us to be persistence in our prayers. He tells us how to pray, when the disciples petition him, "Lord, teach us to pray." In John 15, Jesus teaches "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." (John 15:7)

Jesus not only talks about prayer, teaches about prayer, encourages others to pray, but he also does it himself. On regular occasion, we hear that Jesus separates himself from the others to pray. He goes to a lonely place to pray. He prays late into the night, and before the morning dawn. He prays on the mountain top with Moses and Elijah, and when he is coming up from the Jordan at his baptism.

Jesus talks the talk and walks the walk. From Galilee to Judah, from Capernaum to Jerusalem, Jesus takes the time to pray to His Heavenly Father.

And shouldn't we follow his example?

Pray always and do not lose heart.

Prayer is easy in the good times, but it takes dark night of the soul praying to keep one strong and able to endure until the end. Praying through cancer and kidney disease, through heart disease and through dementia, praying through insomnia and depression, is all a valuable gift of God's strength given to you. It draws us closer. Makes us strong. It connects us with each other, and keeps us in close contact with our loving and compassionate God. Persistent prayer serves as a living example of the truly miraculous taking place right here in our midst.

The question isn't why me? Or when will Christ return? The question is, will you and I be persistent in prayer? Will we be faithful, through the good and bad times, so that the Lord will find us faithful in the end? That, my beloved, is the question for us today.

Pray always and do not lose heart.

Amen.

³ Ibid., Craddock, F. et. al.

⁴ Mark 13:13 NRSV