

“Pray always. Do not lose heart.”

Luke 18:1-8

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

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Pray always. Do not lose heart.

I am grateful for the parable that Jesus offers us this morning, as some days it feels so easy to lose heart. He tells the story of a powerful judge, a man with a reputation of not respecting other people or God, who somehow seems to take delight in repeatedly ignoring the cries of a powerless woman.

We might imagine this judge – who neither fears God nor cares about anything besides his own power – we might imagine him drawing the ire and disrespect of the entire community around him: “How can he lack all decency?” they probably wondered. “How is it that he can just look the other way when people come to him for help? How can he openly express such disgust for the poor, the orphan, the alien, and the widow?”

They would have known from their religious texts that God commands us to care especially for these, the least among us. And yet, after all that bombast and hateful speech they would see this judge return home to his gilded mansion at night, sleeping soundly, never paying a price for his cruelty and disrespect.

Yes, it's easy today to lose heart.

So I am grateful for this parable, and for this widow. She, a person with no resources or power of her own, she cries out for justice day and night at the feet of this judge. “How long?” she cries. Every day, he has to look her in the eyes and reject her yet again. But her persistence, it seems, outlasts his cruelty, and eventually he gives her what she wants.

Justice long denied is finally granted; hope is restored.

I am grateful for this widow, and I am grateful for the countless others who have, throughout history, demanded justice that was long denied them. I am grateful for the people in our midst who, like her, focus our eyes back towards the needs of the world. And it is these voices, says Jesus, that show us what *prayer* really looks like!

Prayer, our relationship to our Creator, looks like a widow crying for justice. It looks like people marching in the street. It looks like you and like me whenever we reach down into the depths of our hearts, pull up our deepest held longings and hopes, and announce them loudly to the powers who would seek to deny their fulfillment.

I am grateful for the voices that show us how to do this. Because otherwise it would be so easy to lose heart, would it not? “The arc of the moral universe is long,” preached Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “but it bends towards justice.” The widow knew this, and we, by faith, must know it, too.

Though it is so easy to lose heart.

So I was pretty thrilled this week when one such voice was awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature. Minnesota's very own, Bob Dylan.

Though his career and his many personas span over half a century, the songs of his played most on NPR this week seemed to all come from those early Dylan years, where his songwriting sought to give voice to the social movements taking place around him. One of his earliest and best songs became somewhat of an anthem during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. I wonder if we can hear our widow singing their words in a full-throated voice to that hateful judge. It goes:

*How many years can a mountain exist
Before it's washed to the sea?
Yes, and how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind*

It's just a-blowin' in the wind.

God's response to our cries is, like the wind, either out there and unknowable and impossible for us to see or discern. OR, as the wind feels especially this time of year, God's answer to our persistent prayers is hitting us right in the face: harsh, obvious, even unpleasant at times, but very present.

The first time I moved to Minnesota, it was for college. And I remember so vividly that first Minnesota winter. It was brutal. I didn't mind too much the snow or the ice or the subzero temperatures. It was the *wind*. As I scurried from building to building, the arctic wind would not only make my eyes water as it howled into my face, but it would also freeze my tears to my skin. My beard would be encased in ice. It was all because of the wind.

So our prayers that rise up out of our hearts before God, maybe their answer is in the wind: it is in the blowing of God's Holy Spirit, and sometimes that wind comes in like a comfortable, warm summer breeze...and sometimes it's all Minnesota winter, bringing tears to our eyes.

Which brings me back to our widow. Did you know that, in the Greek, Luke actually uses a boxing term to describe the judge's concerns about this feisty petitioner? Rather than, 'I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming,' a better translation would actually be, 'I will grant her justice, or else she will keep coming and end up giving me a black eye!'

Yes, the answer is blowing in the wind...or, in a nicely placed right hook, I guess. "How many times can a man turn his head, and pretend that he just doesn't see?" Well, this widow makes him see...and then some!

Pray always. Do not lose heart.

In this parable, Jesus is inviting us to be like that widow: to make prayer a way of life, to understand our faith in God as a call to do justice. As we say each time we gather around the baptismal font, one mark of the baptized is that we strive for justice and peace in all the earth. Such a calling is only undertaken through constant prayer, through a relentless and persistent conversation with our Creator.

So do we pray like this, church? Do our prayers turn our eyes like the wind towards the cries of God's people? I wonder what the church would look like if we became a living prayer like that widow, convicted by our faith to join in God's long arc towards justice. Sometimes we are very good, very persistent at caring for the concerns of who we are in this place, and that is important too. We spend our time concerned with the color of the carpet or the quality of a church program...and it is OK to steward these things. But I'm not sure that, if this is as far as faith goes, that these things alone will keep us from losing heart.

Unless we speak out loud to one another, and before God, the deep concerns and longings of our hearts; unless we turn our eyes to see those who cry for justice in our communities...we will lose heart. Faith calls us to be engaged in these ways, to look beyond self, to join in God's mission for the life of the world.

And joining in this mission in our own way is, according to Jesus, what prayer looks like. This Sunday and in the weeks to come, we will hear a member of our community share something about this church that captures their attention and hearts, a ministry that draws them closer to God and deepens faith. What is that thing for you? Or...how can this community be a place where each of us can name our hopes for a broken world with the same persistence and tenacity as that widow?

Today, we will give/have given Bibles to our third graders: an important step on this journey of faith. In God's Word, we are called to wrestle as the widow wrestled. The wind of the Spirit meets us there, and through the sacred stories and texts we are called to be God's people in the world.

As we gather in this place, as God's people, may we continue to wrestle in prayer in just the same way. May we be bold in our proclamation of all the good things God has done for us. May we feel restless until all God's people find fairness and justice. And, belonging to one another and to God, may we never, ever lose heart.

Amen.