

participation in the cause is still important. And our prayers, trusting God to act on our behalf, matter very much. Pressing on and not losing heart is our call.

After telling his parable, Jesus asked what seemed like a rhetorical question: “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” He referred again to the time to come, when Christ will return in glory. And he wondered whether, at that time, people would still be living in faith. The parable indicates that our persistence in working for God’s causes is a sign of our faith. Our continued prayer and devotion, even when things bleak, is a sign of our faith. As one writer says, the message is “keep on praying with conviction in spite of the dark and difficult days ahead.”⁴

I need that encouragement sometimes. Especially when the world feels heavy and the problems seem too much to bear. But I also find encouragement in the fact that Jesus wasn’t just saying work harder to keep the faith. The parable says that God is *not like* the unjust judge. That judge was just tired of being bothered by the widow and so he relented. Jesus said God will grant justice to the ones who cry out in faith, day and night. God will not delay in helping them. God will quickly grant them justice. You and I might take issue with what exactly is meant by “quickly” here. Yet the message is certain: God brings justice, perhaps most often through the actions and prayers of people who persist in working toward it. Through those who do not throw in the towel, those who take on some personal risk, those who invest resources, even when it’s not so apparent what fruit they are bearing. In those actions, we practice faith with persistence. In those actions, God sees our faith. For us, working toward justice and goodness in the world may feel like a long defeat or a long slog, with just occasional wins. But we do not need to lose heart. We channel that widow who kept on coming. We put one foot in front of the other, as we pray earnestly, one more time, ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



October 16, 2022

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“The Long Defeat?”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

So many important causes feel like an uphill battle these days. Our efforts often feel very small in light of the scale of the problems. Whether it’s hunger, climate change, structural racism or something else important and big, we take small actions on our own and, when we can, participate in bigger projects to make change. But those baby steps can feel invisible and we wonder how meaningful they’ll really be. Sometimes we just want to throw up our hands and say, “I quit.”

Jesus told a parable about justice, persistence, and prayer. There are lots of perspectives about who the judge represents, what the widow’s life was like, and what that all means about God’s answers to our prayers. But one commentator had a different and refreshing perspective on the parable. Dan Clendenin writes “There’s no mysterious meaning here. The parable is straightforward. Despite our feelings of futility and vulnerability in our broken world, don’t give up. Keep praying.”¹ The parable presses us to keep praying, and also to keep working, keep agitating for what is just and right and good. In a time when many scoff at the offer of “thoughts and prayers” in response to terrible situations, Jesus urges us not to give up on praying for what God intends. And also to be persistent with our actions toward justice, just like the widow.

Luke wrote this story down in the period after Jesus’ death and resurrection, when people were anticipating Christ’s imminent return. Technically, we still live in that period right now, waiting for Christ to come again to set the world right. But in Luke’s time, people believed Jesus would return to earth at any moment. As time went on and Jesus did not show up, they began to lose faith. Life was hard; Christians were often persecuted. Facing all that, it was easy, then, to simply throw in the towel on trusting in the God of Jesus Christ. It was easy to say, “I quit.”

Our journey of faith looks different than it was for people in Luke’s time. But it’s still pretty easy and sometimes alluring, to throw in the towel on faith. Lots of people have; we all know plenty of them. Some of them are

1 Dan Clendenin, “The Lord is Your Keeper,” October 9, 2022, *Journey with Jesus*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3477>

2 Farnaz Fassihi and Jane Arraf, “Protests in Iran spread, including to oil sector, despite violent crackdown,” *New York Times*, Oct 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/12/world/middleeast/iran-women-protests-strike.html>

3 Dan Clendenin, “Fighting the Long Defeat: Dark Struggles and Divine Blessings,” *Journey with Jesus*, October 17, 2010, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20101011JJ.shtml>

4 Vanthanh Nguyen, SUD, *Connections: A Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 403.

our family members, and their departure from religious life pains us deeply. Some of them are our friends, who have turned to the temple of Starbucks or the cathedral of Nature in which to worship, instead of the church. Both of those places are nice sometimes, even I admit. Some people have just slowly drifted away from God, perhaps because they never deepened their faith to make it truly their own; or because the experience they had in the church felt dull in comparison to the radical love of Jesus Christ. For all those people, and maybe even for us sometimes, in this world filled with so much sorrow, we aren't sure it's worth it to keep on praying; we aren't sure we can keep on living in faith and hope.

Enter the widow. Someone beaten down by the world and well acquainted with sorrow. Someone whose hopes for a good life had not been met. Widows in Jesus' time symbolized powerlessness and vulnerability. No one would have blamed someone like her for giving up. This woman was dealing with a particular problem. Someone was troubling her - the person she called 'her opponent.' But for someone like her, it was very unlikely she would get justice and win her case against them. That was especially true, since she was dealing with an unjust judge.

Though the odds were against her, she kept coming to the judge to defend her cause. Though she could have given up, or turned to unsavory means to get back at her opponent, she stayed the course. She continued to plead her case, to agitate for what was right, to stand up for herself.

Today's book, *Are You My Mother*, by P.D. Eastman is one I bet a lot of you read to your kids or grandkids. Published in 1960, the baby bird knows how important it is to find his mother. It's only right that he know her and be near to her. So his pursuit to find her is relentless. On and on he goes, until his search finally bears fruit and he finds what he is looking for. Though his situation was not one of injustice, simply circumstance, his refusal to give up is inspiring. Like the widow, I think the baby would have worn out all the other animals and characters until he found his mother bird.

Over the past month, we've watched protests emerge in Iran against the conservative Islamic Republic government. In September, 22 year old Mahsa Amini was arrested by the country's morality police for infractions against the requirement for women to dress modestly and cover their hair.² Amini died in their custody, which her family attributes to abuse by the authorities. Women's groups began protesting against the repressive regime and those calls for freedom have exploded. This week workers in the oil sector were joining in and other workers threatening to stop work in support. The authorities have cracked down and clashed with protestors, resulting in a number of injuries and deaths.

It's a complex situation. Government and religion are overtly intertwined in Iran. Yet we must be careful not to make assumptions about what that means about Muslims in general or the tenets of their faith. A pastor colleague of mine is supporting a couple who immigrated to the US from Iran in the last year. She says that the wife attends school full time and all her other hours are spent crying about the situation back home in Iran - weeping for the women whose lives are so constricted, weeping for those facing death or injury because they are expressing their opinions, weeping for the brokenness of a beautiful country. When I first heard about the protests in Iran, I assumed it was a blip. From my own Women's Studies background, I know that being female in Iran is not easy. But I kept hearing about the women, especially, going public with their message and pushing for freedom. I admire their courage and perseverance, seeking to have their dignity and their own life decisions respected, especially when the odds are so clearly against them. The pursuit of justice can be a monumental climb and sometimes the risks are very steep.

Paul Farmer was a physician and professor at Harvard Medical School who died much too soon in February of this year. Farmer was known for his work in Haiti through his non-profit organization that brought healthcare to the very poorest places - a great pursuit of justice. In the biography of Farmer's life, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, by Tracy Kidder, he shared a story of working tirelessly to fly a very sick Haitian man to Boston for surgery, using funds from his non-profit. In the end, the man died anyway. Lots of people questioned whether that had been a good use of twenty-thousand dollars. Farmer said, "I have fought for my whole life a long defeat. How about that? How about if I said that all it adds up to is defeat? I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I actually think sometimes we may win."³ Farmer got that phrase, the *long defeat*, from JRR Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings*, who was a devoted Catholic.

Farmer and Tolkien meant by the phrase that they were engaged in a struggle for what was right and just. They were working for the goodness God intended, as best they understood it, in relation to love and mercy. As Christians, they both knew the crucified Christ had engaged in a life and a ministry that seemed, to many, to be a long defeat. And that the life of faith today often feels similar, even as it is peppered with occasional glimpses of final victory: wins, as Farmer called them. But both those men, and I suspect the women in Iran, and maybe the widow, too, believed that persistence in the cause of justice is worth it. We don't always know what the end will be. Sometimes it feels like a long defeat. But our ongoing