

Keeping On

Ps.121; Luke 18: 1-8

Rev. Carrie Bail  
October 16, 2016  
Burlington VT.

*“I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from God who made heaven and earth. “*

When I was about eight, my beloved grandfather, who lived with us, gave me his dog-eared little book of psalms and told me that Ps. 121 was his favorite. He died in a Christian Science home just a few months later. So I memorized that psalm to comfort myself during the time of grieving him, although Psalm 121 didn't make much sense where I lived then on the south shore of Boston. There are more swamps than big hills, and no mountains. Summers, though, we spent in the mountains of western Maine and most of my adult life I've lived in places where I could see mountains out of my living room window: in Mexico; in rural O'ahu; in the Berkshires, and now here, sandwiched between the beautiful Greens and the Adirondacks. So especially beautiful in the fall.

Looking at mountains is, for me, a reassurance of God's love as I look up and outside myself from the safety of home. You might be surprised to learn, as I was, that the original use of this psalm was quite different. It was the song of pilgrim travelers on a holy journey to Jerusalem, looking up as they walked. Pilgrimage was risky for them, including exposure to the noon day sun as well as to the moonlit chills and many other dangers. They had to trust in El Shaddai, the God of the Mount of Jerusalem.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills” they sang – my help comes from a God who is actively walking with me on the journey, a companion marching with me to the city of God.

Beautiful poetic words. When we recite them now, do we want to be at rest in our armchairs or worship pews, simply looking for our own peace and comfort? Or wanting eternal rest for the loved one we bury? Or can we re-imagine them as marching words for a pilgrimage, for an inspiration to seek the God of a just and peaceful world, a God who keeps company with us as we walk through the valleys as well as the peaks? Which way do you choose to hear it?

It’s no accident that this psalm is paired up with the Luke passage which we often call the parable of the Unjust Judge. Do you like this story? I don’t. Let me count the ways that it bothers me.

First, let’s be honest. Is this story given to us as a reason to be persistent in prayer, promising that in the end you’ll get what you want if you bug God enough? If so, it is patently false. Let me guess: everyone in this room has prayed for something, prayed really hard and persistently, and it didn’t happen that way. Right? Anyone for whom this is not true? So now let me see the hands of those whose heart has been broken by not getting the response that you wanted?

My heart has been broken this way. We have a very deep health concern in our family which I cannot and will not name for you. I have prayed and prayed about it, for more than ten years. So have my husband and the rest

of my family. And it is still not resolved in a way that is healing to our family. That's all I'll say about our concern. But there are times I anguish over this unresolved prayer and I lament and complain to God over the suffering. I'm sure many of you have similar heartbreaks: difficulty in health or relationships or deaths within your family, things you have prayed for continually but not found peace in the way you had hoped. Unanswered prayer is a quandary if our Christianity is childish.

But I'll point something out to you might not have heard in the reading: JESUS NEVER SAYS THAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT GETTING WHAT YOU WANT. IT IS NOT ABOUT UN ANSWERED PRAYER . HE SAYS: PRAY ALWAYS AND NEVER LOSE HEART.

Who is listening anyway, at this point? Nearly a chapter earlier Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees, in public. His disciples were there as well. For the author writing these words, though, the real audience is not the people he writes about, gathered around Jesus at that point in time, but rather the gentile community of Christians living under severe persecution who were listening to it read. Times were hard. The Jerusalem temple had been destroyed; the early Christians were persecuted by the Roman state. Luke's people were waiting desperately for the End Times, supposing that the Second Coming would arrive any day, and save them. But Jesus, through Luke, DID emphasize that in the meantime, they must not lose hope. Never lose heart.

Bernard Brandon Scott, a scholar who wrote an amazing book called "Hear, then, the Parable", thinks the first sentence was an editorial addition.

He believes that Luke used this parable, which is unlike anything else in the other gospels, precisely because he was writing to a persecuted church. Scott exegetes the story by delving deeply into a description of the social system of Jesus' time. The widow represents the weakest and most vulnerable members of that society. With no husband she has no support. Without the help of the judge in addressing what was almost certainly a legitimate claim of debt collection, she has no resources.

The judge represents the opposite end of the social totem pole. He is a city dweller, a person of wealth and honor and power, who is obligated by Jewish law to help those on the margins. By right he should be the patron of any widow, orphan, or sojourner in need of sustenance. And this is the surprise, the "aha" of this story: the judge does NOT fit with this Jewish expectation of God's righteousness, saying that he respects neither God nor man. This is scandalous for Jesus' audience, a judge without honor. When he finally does the right thing, after days of resisting, it is not for the right reasons. It is simply for the sake of his own comfort and desire not to be bothered.

Scott says we do not need to force-fit a comparison between the judge and God to understand this parable. God cannot be anything like this cruel and heartless man. Instead the parable is really about the widow: the one who keeps on coming back, the one who persists in knocking, physically beating upon that door. She does not make a deferential speech that she or any other petitioner customarily make in front of such a powerful person: because he is not honorable and thus does not deserve it.

The widow, on the margins of society, is a metaphor of God's Kingdom; Scott says "A hearer of this parable will discover the Kingdom under the guise not of a just judge, but of a pestering widow who exposes her own shamelessness in continually pressing her cause upon a dishonorable judge." Jesus upholds persistence not so much in passive prayer as in actively seeking God's justice and God's kingdom. That is the journey, the pilgrimage we share WITH God our companion.

Life IS a struggle. Some periods of history are harder to live through than others. In Jesus time poverty was rampant; this woman and her children had been left behind. The laws of the Torah were frequently violated, then AND now. A cruel judge, or a cruel system, may deny justice to the vulnerable poor *for no reason at all*. How do we get back to a vision of God's shalom, a world where there is enough for everyone despite human cruelty. It is that persistent cry for justice, that persistent march for peace, that unceasing knock at the door. One nameless African-American pastor said after years of participating in the Civil Rights movement: "UNTIL you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is."

When Jesus tells us never to lose heart, he is stating the truth that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." This quote is often attributed to MLK Jr, but it actually goes back further, to the 1820's and a Unitarian abolitionist pastor named Theodore Parker. That tilt of the arc toward justice may appear to be almost flatline from our position, but it is imperceptibly an arc in which we lean toward hope.

It is less about the individual person praying to answer his own needs, and more about the community member who wants the kind of Biblical justice that God desires for the whole community.

We are indeed on this arc toward justice, but if we can't see the end of it, why should we keep on? Maybe, just maybe, it's about the journey itself, that pilgrimage toward justice. Notice that this widow does not sit passively in her living room looking up at the mountains and wishing that God would hear her. She gets up and does something about it. She doesn't accept the status quo, but instead goes on a quest for justice. She's gotten up on her own two feet and turned her face toward Jerusalem. Armed with her faith and her belief in what is right, she goes to advocate for herself and she never gives up. She is persistent. Day after fruitless day she leaves a child with a babysitter, takes a day off from a minimum wage job, and puts her pennies together to take a bus cross town to knock on the door of the law, seeking the justice she knows is due.

Can you imagine what our lives might be like if we lived our prayers like that? Prayer as a thing of action, a physical seeking of righteousness: taking care of the poor and the orphans and the widows. It is rediscovering a compassionate heart which identifies with the suffering and the alleviation of pain. It is committed persistence, never giving up. Instead we keep on keeping on with what is right. Then prayer becomes a way of life.

To go back to beginning song of the pilgrimage. God is not just some distant and aloof being to whom we speak only vaguely, from a safe distance, looking out the window. Life is a journey we are in the midst of, in which we ourselves are called to seek justice with God our fellow-traveller.

.

Sing: "We are marching in the Light of God"

Wherever there are people working and hoping and singing, it is a struggle arching toward justice. It is struggle to make ends meet for those on the bottom tier. It is a struggle to find a way of being church that will work well in this century. It is a struggle for an identity that binds us in relationship to our loving God. We make mistakes, we find ourselves as victims of arbitrary misfortune. We pick up and start over. There is no guarantee that the struggle or that arc of justice will come to an end while we are still alive. More likely it will be some time in the distant future.

Yet God claims us as his own, blesses us, and asks us to be on his team as the Kingdom of God relentlessly keeps coming. Don't ever give up on it, and don't ever lose heart.

then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' 4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" 6And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"