

"Not Losing Heart"

Luke 18:1-8

October 17, 2010

21st Sunday After Pentecost

It's very easy to lose heart and become discouraged these days. Just look around and pick a problem. We have a seemingly unending war, not only in Afghanistan, but with terrorism in general. The economy is poor, causing people to lose their homes, their jobs, and their financial security. Crime plagues, not only big cities, but small town America. Drugs and alcohol are destroying peoples' lives, both the lives of those who use and the lives of those who love them. We see marriage collapsing - not only individual marriages, but the institution itself. Many people choose to live together outside of marriage which seems okay now, but can cause insecurity and instability later. Families are collapsing, re-forming, and collapsing again. There are problems in our schools with behavior and lack of learning. There are problems in our churches with lack of attendance for people to be ministered to and lack of funds to do the ministering.

What is one to do? It seems pointless to believe in God and practice your faith. You pray and nothing seems to change or improve. You might as well abandon that and have as much fun as you can while you can have it. From the looks of things, many people have chosen to do just that.

Jesus encountered people just like us in our Gospel reading for today. Just previous to our text, Jesus was teaching about the end of all things and the coming of the kingdom. This frightened people, as it might frighten us. We might look around at everything happening and think, "It's bad now, but it's only going to get worse." So, our text says, "[Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."

It's an interesting story involving a widow. She was involved in some dispute with an enemy of hers. The exact nature of the dispute is unclear, but evidently it was serious. She needed help. However, there was no one more powerless in Biblical society than a widow. Only men could pursue justice. Women could not. Without a husband, she stood little chance of getting justice.

On top of that, the judge who could give her justice, not only held all the cards, but was himself unjust. He did not fear God which meant he was a pagan. He did not respect man which meant that he lacked fairness, objectivity, and any adherence to the basic social customs of the day. He had no shame in dealing with others. He was very unfair.

It would be easy for this widow to lose heart, to become discouraged, and simply to give up. However, instead of giving up, the widow continued to come to the judge again and again and again, asking for justice. She was persistent and shameless in her request. She didn't give up.

For awhile, the judge refused. Then, amazingly, he gives in. He says to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming." His decision is amazing. The widow is persistent, yes, but the real reason why he gives her justice is so that "she will not beat me down". The word here literally means "give me a black eye", that is, do damage to his reputation. "This is a remarkable statement for a man who does not feel appropriate shame. He seems to be worried about the embarrassment the harassment of this woman is causing him. Contrary to what he has said about himself and what the narrative has confirmed, he *does* care what other people think about his behavior." (Just, p.673) The unjust judge gives justice to the widow to protect his reputation.

We are like the widow in this parable. We face three huge adversaries who wish to destroy us: the devil, the sinful world, and even our own sinful selves. Not only do we suffer through the discouraging problems caused by our adversaries which I mentioned earlier, but we face death and hell because of these adversaries, as well. We need help from God. However, we don't need justice (that would mean our death and destruction). We need justifying.

Yet, we are weak. As creatures, we have no power to demand things from our Creator. As sinners, we have no right to expect deliverance from our God.

On top of that, God, who is our judge, is a righteous Judge. There is no bias or unfairness within Him. You might think that's good, but only if you are innocent. You're not. I'm not. That

means we will lose our case before Him. We will be condemned for that is what we deserve from a righteous and fair Judge who cannot tolerate or excuse any sin or wrong doing.

Like the widow, it would be easy to become discouraged and give up. Our adversaries are strong. We are weak. Our problems are big and our solutions are small. Our life is bad now and the prospects for the future are worse. A day of judgment is coming. We do the only thing we can do: cry out to God, not to be given justice, but to be given justification.

Jesus says, "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?" The inferred answer here is, yes, He will do just that. He will give justice, that is, justification, a state of being right with Him, to His people.

Is it because of our many prayers? The sincerity of our prayers? The power of our prayers? No. Like with the unrighteous judge, it is all a matter of reputation. The unrighteous judge, as bad as he was before God and man, was still concerned about damaging his reputation, as weak as it might have been. Will not God, who is righteous, be even more concerned about damaging His reputation? The fundamental characteristic of God is his compassion and mercy for sinners. "God will vindicate the elect who cry to him day and night in their suffering, not because of their persistent prayers and cries, but because he is merciful and compassionate." (Just, p.675)

Jesus goes on to say, "Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily." And that is what He did. In the next chapter of Luke, we find Jesus entering Jerusalem triumphantly on that first Palm Sunday on His way to triumph on a cross on a day called Good Friday. There on the cross, justice was served. The righteous Judge condemned and punished the sin of all mankind in His Son, Jesus Christ. Through His suffering and death, the condemnation of the Law was completed. Justice was received by God the Father.

In doing so, justification – a declaration of "not guilty" – was given to mankind. Sin was removed from us as it was punished in Jesus. In God's holiness, Jesus was declared guilty and punished so that God, in His mercy, could declare us not guilty and set us free.

We are vindicated and our enemies are defeated in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Sin has been forgiven. Death has been overcome. Our adversaries are powerless. The devil has been defeated. The sinful world will be destroyed. Our sinful selves have been put to death in Baptism and, by that same Baptism, new sinless individuals have been created.

Thus, we have hope. Even though we live with war, a poor economy, and crime, we have hope. Even though institutions like marriage, the family, schools, and churches are being undermined and threatened, we have hope. How do we exercise our hope and express our confidence? Jesus says that we "ought always to pray and not lose heart."

We are to pray constantly for the Kingdom of God to come so that we might be relieved of these very real and very serious problems from our already defeated enemies. We are to remember and believe that God is merciful and long-suffering and He will deliver His elect in Christ. It is this activity and this faith which will cause us never to lose heart. For, no matter how big and powerful our problems are, God is bigger and more powerful. And He is the God who is merciful and has already declared us to be right with Him through the work of Jesus Christ.

Our constant prayer and lack of discouragement is also a sign to the world. At the end of the text, Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" He's not talking about saving faith here, but faithfulness. Will we allow ourselves, both as the church and individual church members, to be overrun by the world? Will we neglect prayer for the activities of the flesh? Will we become discouraged and grumble about our current state of affairs? Will we become hopeless as the world becomes worse and simply give up?

Or, will we be constant in prayer and refuse to lose heart as an example and source of hope for the world? One commentator put it this way, "The persistent prayer of the saints that God's kingdom come to relieve them from their suffering is a sign in the world of the faith of the church...Persistent prayer of loyal disciples is evidence of the community's faith in God's faithfulness as she watches for Christ's coming." (Just, p.676) Not only can we live without losing heart but we

can, as individuals and as the church, be a beacon of hope for others who long to live with that same kind of hope and confidence.

So, take heart, as you face the world every single day. Never lose heart, no matter what the world throws at you. For the heart of God has been merciful to you. He has not given you the justice which you deserve, but the justification which you do not deserve through the merits of Jesus Christ. He will rescue you from all of life's injustices, problems, pain, and sorrow. At the last, He will bring you to be with Him where none of these things and none of your adversaries can harm you. Of that, you can be sure. Amen.