

ON NOT LOSING HEART

JEREMIAH 31: 27-31; LUKE 18:1-8

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THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A colleague tells the story of her seven-year-old granddaughter who was celebrating her birthday with her mother and grandparents. The cake with candles was paraded to the table, after the singing the little girl was ready to blow out the candles.

Her grandmother said, "Make a wish." The little girl asked, "Why? It never works." "What do you mean?" asked the grandmother. "I mean last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away but she did. This year I want to wish that my mommy and daddy will get back together...."

The little girl's mother said from across the table, "Honey, I'm sorry but that isn't going to happen." Sometimes when we pray I think we feel like that little girl. It seems like what we pray for stands little or no chance of happening. Why bother?

Or take Eric Clapton the well-known popular and blues guitarist/singer. After the tragic death of his young son, Clapton wrote a song called, "Tears in Heaven." It is one of the great songs of one of the greatest performers of his generation.

In the song, Clapton is singing to his son. The words well up from the bowels of his tragedy, his sorrow, his grief. "Time can bring you down," he says, "time can bend your knees. Time can break your heart and have you begging please"

Jesus knew despair like that little girl's and Eric Clapton's. So he told his followers the story that Rick read this morning about the persistent widow tirelessly petitioning the overworked, angry judge.

I'd like to talk today about prayer but also about what this lesson tells us here in the midst of our stewardship season and on a Sunday when we welcome new members.

Maybe the real problem with prayer is persistence. We persist at very little these days. Instant oatmeal. Three minute boiled egg. One hour dry cleaning. Oil change in less than an hour. Microwaves, faster computers, mail-order shopping. We don't like to wait much.

Our instant gratification society impacts expectations in our spiritual life. How could it not?

But even in Jesus' day, when instant oatmeal didn't exist and people were used to waiting persistence in prayer was a problem because of what Jesus called losing heart.

The word heart comes from the Latin word 'cor' from which we make the word courage. Losing heart is like losing courage. We say we've lost our courage, we've lost heart.

The other night I watched Fahrenheit 911. It is not an easy movie to see. I don't mean the politics of the movie. I mean the scenes from the war in Iraq, interviews with American soldiers, interviews with Iraqis. Before the film was over I turned it off. I didn't have the heart to watch any more.

Life can cause us to lose heart.

It helps to remember that Luke's gospel was written a generation and a half after Jesus. Things were not going well for the people with the Roman occupation. The Roman army stood over Jerusalem like vultures circling a corpse. There was no sign the kingdom Jesus talked about was coming any time soon.

Jesus, who'd promised he'd return shortly after the resurrection was not back yet either. People were beginning to feel like the little girl with unfulfilled wishes or Clapton with dashed dreams. They were losing heart.

The widow in Jesus' parable, like the people Luke was talking to, like Jesus' followers, like anyone suffering from a lost heart was fighting against the odds. Jesus doesn't say what her complaint is about. But it's not hard to guess.

Since she is a widow, her case probably concerned her dead husband's estate. Under Jewish law she cannot inherit it – it goes straight to her sons or her brother-in-law. But she is allowed to live off of the estate – unless someone is trying to cheat her out of it.

The fact that she stands alone indicates that none of the men in her family have taken up her cause. If she had any protectors left they would have kept her at home and settled things in a more civilized way. No son wants his mother hanging out the family laundry in public. No brother-in-law wants his brother's widow disgracing the family name.¹

We are talking about a situation where you lose heart and you'd think this widow would have lost her heart a long time ago. Not to mention, she is facing a judge who doesn't care what God or anyone else thinks. I love how, once again, Jesus uses an outcast of society – a vulnerable widow – to show us what faith looks like.

Last week Henry Thiagaraj visited us, he is a Dalit, formerly known as the Untouchables, from India. Henry is 70 years old. Full of vitality, vision, kindness.

He started and runs a vocational school in Madras for Dalit young adults to learn the arts of catering and nursing and computer skills. He told us about conditions today in India for Dalits. The state of affairs he described sounded like race relations in this country in about 1920 – when lynching was still taking place in some parts of the south.

Dalits are still murdered today and the crimes go uninvestigated. We saw on a DVD Henry showed us of his work, a scene of a Dalit mother and her son who were walking through a neighborhood of higher caste. In the traditional manner, they both took off their shoes and put them on their heads.

Can you imagine people from the East Side taking off their shoes and putting them on their heads if they had to walk down Lexington Ave. or Main St. in Snyder?

I kept asking myself, as Henry was talking, how he keeps going. "What gives you hope," I finally asked. He said he believes in his heart he is doing what a Christian should do. He said he receives small signs from unexpected places and people that confirm what he believes. Like a local policeman who goes out of his way and risks helping the Dalit youth.

It occurred to me that Henry Thiagaraj is like the widow in Jesus' parable. Like her, despite the fact that he is engaged in a struggle for justice with a deeply engrained cultural injustice, he is utterly persistent.

Truth be told many of us probably pray and practice our faith on an "as needed" basis. Life without crisis and pain can take on a certain 'take it for granted' quality. Don't call us God, we'll call you. And when the time of need or crisis comes we often don't so much call God as wonder how God could have taken his eye off the ball, allowed such a horrible set of circumstances to happen.

We pray, says Barbara Brown Taylor, like we brush our teeth – once in the morning and once at night, as part of our spiritual hygiene program.

But Henry Thiagaraj and the widow exercise their faith unceasingly. They've discovered the law Jeremiah said God would write on our hearts – that all of us belong to God.

They trust the conviction deep inside them, therefore, that injustice in our world should be addressed, suffering should be alleviated, the poor and outcast should have their day in court, the laws should be enforced for all people.

Nothing external to them dissuades their trust, not overwhelming odds, not a caste system thousands of years old, certainly not one angry judge.

But sometimes we are not so persistent. Rather than say 'yes' when all the world around us is saying 'no' we begin to say 'maybe' or 'perhaps' and eventually we too join the chorus of 'no.'

We discover that superficial prayers unanswered are less painful than serious prayers unanswered. No prayers unanswered are least painful of all.

Don't ask and you won't be disappointed. Don't seek and you won't be disappointed at what you don't find. As for that growing deadness we feel where our heart used to be, well, we just have to get used to that.ⁱⁱ

The simple truth is that prayer is sometimes about hurling petitions against long periods of silence. The human experience is often one of delay and disappointment.

Ted Ferris, former senior minister of Trinity Episcopal Church at Copley Square, Boston tells the story of another widow – one of the poorest members of his church. Her husband died when she was a young mother with five children. They all turned out to be outstanding people in their fields – a college president, a highly acclaimed medical researcher, a CEO of a major corporation among them. Ferris said at the woman's funeral the college president son said to the gathered company, "To understand my mother you have to understand that she was a woman of prayer. We faced some hardship, we had limited resources. It was her prayer that got her through and shaped us."

Or Martin Luther King who said, "I don't know how I would get everything done if I didn't pray two hours a day" – a little known fact about the great civil rights leader.

What the widow in Jesus' parable knows is that praying when our prayers are not getting answered is precisely the most important time to pray. When our prayers seem meaningless is when we need to say them most.

Here is the crossroads of faith. Here is a choice between active or dead faith. Did that widow take to her bed with a box of Kleenex? No way. She got up every day, washed her face and marched down to see that judge.

I've been learning to play the guitar. I even inflicted my strumming on our WECP children and teachers last week. When you're learning guitar your finger tips hurt like heck holding down the steel strings. But after several weeks you get calluses, your fingers don't hurt any more. You hit the chords with more precision. The music sounds better.

The same thing happens when we pray. It hurts our spiritual knees at first. Kneeling in prayer, kneeling in prayer, we can't take our mind off the pain, the frustration, the lack of progress. But eventually without even noticing it, our focus shifts from ourselves to the ones who are suffering, who are hungry and alone.

And that's when, like Henry from India, we begin to see small unexpected signs around us that we are on the right track, that our praying and actions really do count.

In fact, at this level there is no difference between praying and action. Prayer is action. Action is prayer. We can stay at it a lifetime if need be until that day when the trumpet sounds and kingdom comes.

This work is bigger than anyone of us, we may not see the final fruit of our labor. Rather than deterring us such work inspires us.

The good news in this parable is that the judge is not God. Rather our God is a loving parent who cares for each and every person in this room. How much more, says Jesus, will this God grant what is good to his children who cry to him day and night?

What's the message in stewardship season and to members new and old? It is this: we have work to do. Hard work. Fiscal responsibility and new mission goals.

Ten years ago when we restored this sanctuary we chose to stay here and serve a troubled city. It is what any church should've done. Now is the time to get down on our knees, out in the streets and open our checkbooks. Now is the time to pray big, serve big, give big. With persistence! Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way (Cambridge: Cowley Press, 1999) 197.

ⁱⁱ Taylor, 198.