

## **“Will We Amplify Acts of Heart & Courage?”**

Will we amplify acts of heart and courage? Friends, the Spirit of God (which is Love) has gathered us as community this morning now invites us to wonder together. Let’s open ourselves to being fertile ground for heart and courage to grow even as we open our senses to perceiving acts of heart and courage embodied by others. Let us pray: Spirit of Love, we lean into you to grant us the serenity to accept the things which are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable about a widow who persisted in seeking justice from a resistant judge. According to a comment preceding the parable (more likely written by an editor many years later than by the original writer of the gospel), Jesus told the parable to his disciples to encourage them to be praying always and not losing heart. Why, we might ask, did Jesus focus on encouraging his followers to be prayerful and courageous?

In the preceding chapter of Luke, we heard last week about the encounter between Jesus and a group of ten people who were suffering from leprosy. That encounter occurred as Jesus made his way on his final pilgrimage toward Jerusalem. And in between that healing encounter and today’s parable about the widow and the judge, Jesus spoke with his disciples about the kingdom or rule of God. Asked by a Pharisee (a teacher of Jewish scriptures) when the kingdom of God would be coming, Jesus replied, *“The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you”* (Luke 17: 20-21).

Jesus wanted his disciples to be fully aware of how his life's purpose had been to reveal to them God's rule of love and justice.

Yet, in that same soliloquy in which Jesus declared God's rule to be present in the now and here, Jesus also predicted his imminent suffering and death, because he knew that his radical teachings about love and justice for people on the margins of society were not being received well by the Roman authorities in Jerusalem. The unjust rulers feared Jesus' power of persuasion among the Jewish people. Yet, Jesus also spoke of a future day when he would return to his followers as part of the ultimate culmination of God's peace and justice on Earth.

Is it any wonder then that Jesus felt the need to encourage his disciples to persist in prayer and to not despair? Jesus understood that they would grow weary and possibly lose heart in the years after his suffering and execution. Even if they could, from time to time, perceive the kingdom of God in the present moment, the heavy persecution and torture they experienced throughout their adult lives must have shaken their faith in a God whose rule of justice Jesus had promised them would come more fully in the future.

Let's examine the parable about the persistent widow to discern how it might inform us as we seek to be Jesus' disciples in this age, always praying and not losing heart. The Hebrew word for widow means "silent one" or "one unable to speak." In her context, this unnamed widow made a radical move in speaking out for justice even once, let alone over and over again until she wore down the unjust judge. Widows in Jesus' community were voiceless in that they depended economically on the mercy of others in order to eke out existences somewhere between abject poverty and getting by.

Jewish and Christian scriptures called faithful people to show mercy by providing for widows, recognizing that the society did not allow those women access to providing for themselves.

The widow in Jesus' parable clearly knew that God's rule of justice for the oppressed meant that she was not to remain voiceless, that she was not to let others speak and act for her. She refused to let her society trample on her hope for autonomy. How does the widow model prayer for us? Margit Ernst-Habib, an interpreter of this parable, has shared the following about prayer. Ernst-Habib writes: "*Praying means hopeful trusting in God, not in ourselves.*" The widow likely knew the judge's reputation as a self-absorbed, detached ruler who was highly unlikely to ever hear her voice if not by the power of God's love and justice. Only prayer (that is, hopeful trusting in God embodied in herself) could bolster her courage as she persisted in seeking justice.

In addition to prayer being an attitude of hopeful trust, the widow also models for us her experience of not losing heart. Another interpreter of this parable, H.A. Williams, has said the following: "*In prayer we enter into the realm of reality and see things as they really are, from God's point of view*" (in Talbert, *Reading Luke*). I'll read that thought again: "*In prayer we enter into the realm of reality and see things as they really are, from God's point of view.*" Friends, how often have you found yourself losing heart because your views of reality have been distorted? Has your view of reality been distorted by your own excessive worrying, or by the discouraging effect of that family member, friend, or colleague who seems to always have a negative word to offer, or by the media whose messages consistently tell you that you'll never have enough or be enough? None of these are God's view of reality. In God's view of reality; all are welcome, all are loved, and all are capable.

Today, worshipping communities across the ecumenical Christian community and other faiths recognize Children's Sabbath. Organized annually by the Children's Defense Fund in Washington D.C., the theme for this 2022 Children's Sabbath is "Raising Democracy by Resurrecting Hope."

One of the key missions of the Children's Defense Fund is to reduce the occurrence of violence against children, and gun violence in particular. Who prays like the widow in our contemporary context of excessive gun violence? Listen to the mission statement of an elementary school called Jubilee School in Philadelphia. Jubilee School seeks to provide "*an environment in which children build upon their wealth of creative, intellectual, spiritual, social, physical and cultural resources. We are working to build in students a sense of hope and responsibility, and a knowledge of their power to affect change in our community and the world.*" (And I keep glancing to where our children were leading us in song moments ago.)

I invite you to listen carefully and caringly to the voices of young students of Jubilee School in the following piece, now fifteen years old and yet still absolutely, painfully relevant today. Listen for how in touch they are with God's reality. You may wish to close your eyes for this portion if it helps you to hear their voices. "Jubilee's Children's Campaign Against Gun Violence, by students in fifth and sixth grades." They write:

*"In 2007, almost 400 people were killed in Philadelphia. Most of the gun related homicides ended the lives of people in the age group of 11 to 30. The most dangerous ages to be are teenagers and young adults. Philadelphia is the only major city that has increased gun violence in the last five years.*

*A former student of Jubilee was shot and killed right in front of his house. This inspired us to start a Children's Campaign to end gun violence.*

*We feel passionate about this campaign because we don't want to be deprived of our future. We want our rights back. We want to know that we're safe and secure. As part of our Children's Campaign, we wrote a petition. The petition says:*

***"We the children of Pennsylvania are asking you to let kids live their future. We want our neighborhoods to be gun-free. Please change the laws so we can experience life in a safe environment. You should make the right choice and help us get rid of guns and drugs. We want to grow up with dignity and power instead of being scared."***

*We went to schools and discussed gun violence with children. We wanted to get children's point of view about handguns. We got almost 300 signatures on our petition by students from eight different schools. We presented the petitions to the Philadelphia City Council, the Governor of Pennsylvania, and a State Representative.*

*We organized and participated in a Children's March Against Gun Violence. We were trying to open the eyes of legislators from Pennsylvania, and show them the effects of gun violence on children. We wanted to take matters into our own hands and stress the impact of destruction that gun violence has on our community.*

*We were put on this Earth to make a difference in this world. Gun violence has killed so many kids and adults that we are tired of it. We want to get rid of gun violence for good. Our campaign went beyond what we thought it would. We were invited to a Small Arms Conference, held by the United Nations, to tell our experience with gun violence, and how the laws should be changed. Representatives from other countries listened to us, and treated us seriously and with respect. Although we are children, we want to do our part to make the world a safer place to be."*

Sacred words from holy voices. What a privilege it is to hear from the voices of children (now adults) from Jubilee School in Philadelphia! God listens to the voices of children. And God is truly present in every occasion in which a person in power hears and really listens to the reality expressed by a widow, a child, or anyone else on the margins of society, deprived of power.

A brief look at each of our readings from Hebrew Scriptures will help to answer how. How do children and others whose voices are too often marginalized speak out anyway? How did the woman who was widowed gather and regather tenacity required to persist in seeking justice for herself? It seems to me that she believed that God – that is all-inclusive, creative Love – could be embodied in the midst of any circumstance and by anyone (even a seemingly heartless judge). Her survival depended on Love being embodied through that judge, so she would not give up on the possibility.

The fictional woman in Jesus' parable would have been familiar with the story of our mythical ancestor Jacob. Listen for the "how" of the woman's tenacious persistence as I read again a few phrases in the reading from Genesis:

*"After Jacob had crossed with all his possessions, he returned to the camp, and he was completely alone.*

*And there, someone wrestled with Jacob until the first light of dawn.*

*...the other struck Jacob at the socket of the hip, and the hip was dislocated as they wrestled.*

*Then Jacob's contender said, 'Let me go, for day is breaking.'*

*Jacob answered, 'I will not let you go until you bless me.'*

*Jacob named the place Peniel – “Face of God” – because I have seen God face to face’...”*

Jacob persisted in wrestling with the challenge facing him – until he perceived the face of Love also facing him.

How do you persist in prayer? Do you sometimes catch glimpses of the reality that God sees for us as humankind? Are you challenged (as I certainly am) by this next question from another interpreter of today’s parable: *“What does it mean to rediscover prayer as the Church’s expression of faith in the ultimate goodness of God rather than a wish list for people who feel entitled to have their ‘needs’ met?”* (Soards, Dozeman & McCabe) I’ll read that again: *“What does it mean to rediscover prayer as the Church’s expression of faith in the ultimate goodness of God rather than a wish list for people who feel entitled to have their ‘needs’ met?”*

How might you work to strengthen your own prayer life so that you can *express faith in the ultimate goodness* of God as did the widowed woman and the students of Jubilee School?

May we be about persisting in prayer, both individually and as a community.

May we be about resisting injustice, both individually and as a community.

May we stand with those on the margins, perhaps particularly with women and children, who hear messages that we should be silent.

May we not try to speak for marginalized peoples, but rather welcome, listen, honor, and amplify their voices.

In closing, I'd invite us to hear the words of the Psalmist, spoken directly from their heart to ours. Knowing that God is Love, I will substitute in the word Love for God. You may wish to close your eyes and hold your hands open to receive this blessing from the ancient psalmist. May these words empower you.

*"I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?  
My help comes from [Love],  
who made heaven and earth.*

*[Love] will not let [my] foot be moved;  
[Love] who keeps [me] will not slumber.  
[Love] who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*[Love] is [my] keeper;  
[Love] is [my] shade at [my] right hand.  
The sun shall not strike [me] by day  
nor the moon by night.*

*[Love] will keep [me] from all evil;  
[Love] will keep [my] life.  
[Love] will keep  
[my] going out and [my] coming in  
from this time on and forevermore."*

May we co-create God's reality as the widowed woman, the child, and other wise ones speak that reality to us. Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Genesis 32: 22-31, Psalm 121, Luke 18: 1-8