

Persistence of Hope

Luke 8: 1-8

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It's a parable that Jesus shared with his disciples that can be sometimes difficult for us as modern day readers of scripture to understand. And not because we as readers of this text aren't able to find comparisons in our own lives to unjust leaders or those seeking to become one. But because it can be difficult to understand why Christ is telling us to be like a judge who doesn't believe in God nor cares for his own people.

The parable of the unjust judge opens up with a judge whom we are told neither feared God nor respected people. Many biblical scholars have found the comparison to this unknown judge to King Jehoiakim, the atrocious king of Judah who was "neither reverent toward God nor fair for human beings." We are also introduced to a widow, who is also not named but who is seeking justice against her adversary. It's important to point out that in Jesus' time women who were widows were often considered outcasts. Often, when a woman's husband had died, she could not claim his assets nor his estate. And while we do not know the context of how this woman's husband died or the context of how she had been wronged, we can speculate that she did not have lawyers and was barely getting by in life.

After an unmentioned period of time, the judge gives in. The judge cites the reason for doing so because he grew tired of being harassed by her. The Greek word for this harassment is *hypōpiazē*, which means "to hit under the eye." While it is unlikely the judge feared a physical attack by the woman, the parable draws the conclusion of the judge's fear that the woman's continual nagging would wear him out physically or get him a bad name for refusing to hear her pleas.

From there, we see the unjust judge who we hardly expected, dispensing justice not because he found mercy or had a softening of the heart. But because he only wanted her to quit bothering him.

Like many of you, I find myself struggling with this text. While I can find comparisons in our own world and culture of heartless people in power or those seeking power, I feel like this text is a struggle for many reasons.

First, it doesn't illustrate a judge who dispenses mercy because he suddenly found compassion. After all, even Scrooge and The Grinch in our famous Christmas movies found compassion in the end. But rather, it shows a judge who dispenses mercy only because he merely wanted this widow to leave him alone—much like how I see millennial parents giving their toddler children their cell phones to play with when they act up in grocery store lines.

Secondly, this scripture is difficult for us to understand because sometimes people interpret it as that if we are just persistent enough in prayer, God will grant all our prayers true. This is another theology that many of us struggle to subscribe because all of us know that

sometimes our parents aren't always answered.

And thirdly, many have used the imagery of this judge to being like God. While many Christians like myself seek to move away from the imagery of God as a masculine, all knowing, all ruling judge or king who sits above us and has the authority to grant or deny our pleas of mercy, there is another reason why this theology is so bothersome. If we are to compare this judge to God, then wouldn't we be saying that God only answers are prayers when God wants us to shut up?

However, while this text has disappointments about the failed compassionate conversion of this judge, Jesus does share it with us because of a call to a type of persistence. And it's a persistence that is the very staple of our Christian faith.

Next month will mark the two-year anniversary of the verdict in the death of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African-American man who was shot in killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The verdict, which did not convict the police officer, Darren Wilson of shooting Brown who was unarmed on the charges of murder or homicide, resulted in protests throughout the town of Ferguson, Missouri and continued to illuminate the injustices many African Americans face from law enforcement officers.

Since the Wilson verdict and the continued stories of injustice experienced by Black Americans in our country which stem from systemic and institutional racism, we have seen the rise of the Black Lives Movement which seeks to bring light to the social injustices African Americans face and the need for social change in our judicial and law enforcement systems. For those of us who are not people of color, it's imperative for us to solitary against the racism which still exists in our country with movements like Black Lives Matter.

"Our courts and juries aren't impartial arbiters — they exist inside society, not outside of it — and they can only provide as much justice as society is willing to give," writes social justice activist and journalist Jamelle Bouie.

For Black Americans and people of color, it's their persistence in seeking equality not just in communities but in our country that has been a struggle since this country's inception. And while there has been a tremendous effort made in racial equality in our country, there is still a long way to go. The walls of racism and oppression have been chipped, but still, have not fallen.

Recently I started watching "Orange is the New Black" which is a dark comedy on Netflix centered on a women's prison in upstate New York. The women, who represent different ages, cultures, and backgrounds, struggle against the realities of not only being in a low maximum prison in the middle of backcountry New York State. But it also showcases the struggles they face being women in a prison that are run predominately by white men and the sexism, racism, and dehumanizing actions they face as prisoners.

For many of the women, particularly the lead character named Piper, they enter prison scared and afraid, but optimistic that they will be able to serve their time and return home and

go back to their everyday lives. But as the days go on, they face ridicule, bullying, abandonment of family members and friends and they begin to lose hope. In the show's fourth season, the women begin to experience escalated amounts of abuse physically and mentally not just from their correctional officers. But from the institutional injustices that exist in our American prison system. And it's that loss of hope which culminates in the women taking actions which prolong their sentences and sometimes taking their own lives.

"Hope is a dangerous thing," one of the characters, Claudette says to a fellow inmate who remains hopeful about a possible ending the abuse many of them are facing.

What remains for us as individuals when we lose all hope? What remains of humanity when we lose all hope?

To quote theologian Jurgen Moltmann, "Totally without hope one cannot live. To live without hope is to cease to live. Hell is hopelessness. It is no accident that above the entrance to Dante's hell is the inscription: "Leave behind all hope, you who enter here."

For many of us, the imagery of God as a masculine ruler or judge who has the ability to reject or accept our pleas of mercy is not how we see God. Yet what we do can see, particularly through this text, is the God as a liberator from oppression telling us to be persistent.

"Will not God give justice to his/her elect, who cry to him/her day and night? Will he/she delay long over them? I tell you, God will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will God find faith on earth?"

For us as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be persistent in our call in seeking social-justice. But we also are called to be persistent in our remembrance that through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we will be liberated from our suffering through the cross. And through this persistence we find hope.

For Black Americans, it's a hope of liberation from police brutality and systemic and institutional racism and to make the world know that yes, Black Lives Do Matter that drives all people of color to continue in being persistent in chipping away at the walls of oppression.

For those living with mental health issues, it's the hope of a liberation from their daily suffering and the negative social stereotypes that allow them to continue to be persistent in making others aware of the importance of compassion and care for all people. For those in the LGBTQ community, it's the hope of liberation from those who use out-of-context scripture which has been used to cause hurt and pain that causes the LGBTQ community to be persistent remind people that Love is Love. And for women, it's the hope of liberation from sexism and gender inequality, especially when spoke by a presidential candidate, that drives them to be persistent in their being one day when women would be seen as equal as men.

For people of color, for women, and for the marginalized and the poor, it's their persistence in chipping away at the walls of oppression that gives them hope that they will someday see the walls in front of them collapse and they will find liberation. And for us as

Christians, its the persistence in having hope that we will be liberated by Christ from the oppression and the pain in our lives that allows us to continue to have faith.

Theologian James Cone, who as a black theologian and author liberation theology has expressed liberation theology as this way.

"The Christian community, therefore, is that community that freely becomes oppressed, because they know that Jesus himself has defined humanity's liberation in the context of what happens to the little ones. Christians join the cause of the oppressed in the fight for justice not because of some philosophical principle of "the Good" or because of a religious feeling of sympathy for people in prison. Sympathy does not change the structures of injustice. The authentic identity of Christians with the poor is found in the claim which the Jesus-encounter lays upon their own lifestyle, a claim that connects the word "Christian" with the liberation of the poor. Christians fight not for humanity in general but for themselves and out of their love for concrete human beings."

As a church, we are called to being persistent advocates and social-justice seekers in our country and in our communities. And it's through being persistent advocates and social justice seekers we not only slowly chip away at the walls of oppression, racism, cynicism, and despair. But it's through persistence we engage in living our faith through our actions which often speaks louder than our words.

"We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself," writes theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

As some of you may know, my mother passed away from cancer about eight years ago. Shortly after died, I came across a letter she had written to a friend. While I am not sure the context of the letter, she was rebutting something he had said to her about hopelessness. In her response to him, she not only challenges his view of life, but tells him as even as a woman with cancer, she still sees hope in the world and how that hope is part of her Christian faith. I would like to share some of what she wrote with you.

"Since You Asked Ed:

First and foremost, life is precious because it is God-given. Now before I continue, I don't know if you are aware or not, but as of December 26, 2006, I learned I have small cell lung cancer. It is non-operable cancer that is fast moving.

I have a long way to go, and will never really be rid of it, but I do have hope now. I only mention this so you may better understand my perspective; that is, as of late, I am more aware than ever just how precious life is.

How precious is life? To describe "precious" when it comes to life is difficult. The concept is subjective, similar to words like "love," "hope," and "faith." On the other hand, like "love, hope and faith" we can easily see the preciousness of life just by looking at those around us. For example:

I see how precious life is in the eyes of my fellow cancer victims. I see it in the eyes of the "newbies" (those recently diagnosed) as they hold back the tears while beginning the not so pleasant chemo process. They so fear to lose that precious life, no matter how deep their faith is. At the same time, I also see it in the smiling, cheerful eyes of the "veterans," those who have been undergoing the process for a while. I see it in their words of encouragement, those few words that say, "We are all in this together and how lucky we are to still be here—for life is precious, no matter how nauseated one feels or how physically ugly one feels because of the process." Yes, at an oncology clinic, one quickly becomes aware how precious life is. But I see it in other places too.

I see it at the college where I work. It is a community college where most students have some story of struggle. My specialty is working with "developmental students." These are the students who for one reason or other got "behind" whether academically or just because life threw some detours along the way. I have students with learning disabilities, students who escaped abusive marriages, students who lost jobs, students who have survived addictions, and students who have just lost their way and are trying to get back on track. My students' ages range from 18 (some younger) to in their seventies (believe it or not).

Through many of these students, I see not only hope and determination, but I also see an understanding—an understanding of how life can be hard and yet is precious enough to want to go on—to succeed and to be productive. Interestingly, while for many the initial goal is to make more money at a job, I see the priorities of these students evolve over the years. I see them start to reach out to others, to care for their fellow human beings. Like the cancer victims, they understand we are in this together. We (humans), as imperfect as we are, have something to share, a common good. I believe this is God's intention.

I see it among my peers. I especially remember one day, after most of the students had gone, we were all "hanging out" talking and joking about the days' events. Suddenly I realized there we were—a Baptist minister, a Black Muslim, an atheist (who is a former hippie who seems to still be living in the 60's, a super conservative retired Air Force pilot, and me all friends and getting along. And yes, we even get along while discussing politics and religion too. (The key there, by the way, is "respect.") Regardless of the conversation, it is moments like that though, that I realize there is "hope" in the world.

By the same token, I get the same feeling when I see small gestures like when young men open doors for me and others (and yes, that does happen!), or when I find those beautiful crocheted hats an anonymous elderly woman makes and leaves at the clinic for those of us who suddenly face hair loss.

What is it that I see? Now that I look back I realize that what I am seeing and describing is hope and kindness among fellow human beings. And the only reason for hope and kindness is the realization that life is precious. There is an understanding we all share, and that understanding is that life is precious. And when one of us slips and falls and loses sight of that (as we all do once in a while) it is up to the rest of us to remind him/her just how important and precious life really is.

Yes, there are bad people out there doing bad things. And yes, many of us know that eventually with faith and the grace of God we will all be in a better place, but until Christ deems it is time to "call" us, either individually or "en mass," I firmly believe it is our job to hold life, hold hope, and remember that which God gave us, as precious. My friends, it's through faith we find persistence and through persistence we find hope.

May you continue to have faith and have persistence while be reminded of the hope and the glory that waits for us on the other side.

Bibliography

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