

“Not Losing Heart”

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Two characters in a mini-series, one a garden variety corrupt politician and one a highly principled woman of persistent faith. First, we will briefly consider and dispatch the minor character in the story: **The unjust judge**. No surprises here: we are so accustomed to corrupt politicians that only the completely blind and ignorant think that all the corruption is in one party and not in all parties. In any event, the unjust represent a growing demographic in our midst: No fear of God and no respect for human beings. Here is the blunt arrogance of the powerful. The unjust judge stands for all those who live in direct contradiction to the primary commandments of every major religion in the world: love for God and love for neighbor. Let the unjust judge be the antagonist representing those with all the power.

The main character is a widow appearing before the judge. This widow drives the judge crazy. She gets in his head and causes him to lose sleep. She has the poor judge muttering to himself. “Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” A more literal reading of the text: “She will keep on coming and end up giving me a black eye!” You can see the headlines: “Bag Lady Assaults Judge!”

The powerless widow stands for all those who cry out for justice. Her only recourse is persistence. Her only weapon is voice – pleading, begging, entreating, persuading power. Not much to go on but it is all she has. One widow against the entire empire. No appeal court. See her demanding justice, not with swords or guns or bombs but with speech acts.

This widow cried; she cried out against injustice. Here the act of crying out is a powerful and sacred speech act. This is not whining or nagging; this is tough praying. Many of our prayers are too tame, too King James poetic, too antiseptic. Not this woman. She prays like our kids working overtime to turn NO into YES. After all Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father, ABBA.” This is from the depths of a broken heart, from the desperation of a woman who has lost everything. Perhaps her husband left her destitute and her in-laws bribed the judge and she lost her house, the insurance money, and the retirement pension. No wonder she cries out day and night. The widow followed the judge home from court every night and kept crying out. This judge must have felt like he was in the biblical version of Groundhog Day. Every day the same scene repeated itself over and over.

Jesus has probably cried an ocean of tears over his church supporting some awful, awful, awful unjust causes over the centuries. In our 2 Timothy reading, Paul says for us to study and read the scriptures, so we can get faith right, be instructed in salvation

through faith in Jesus Christ, but religious people can read their holy books wrong. That's has happened with some Muslims. They have dug around in the Koran and found a few verses advocating violence and killing people that disagree with them. They call it "jihad" and use it to justify acts of terrorism in the name of religion. Christians have read the Bible and found ways to justify the killing of Muslims. We called it "crusade." Well, God never sanctions mayhem, violence, and murder. Someone gets up one morning and reads the Bible wrong and all hell breaks loose or even worse, another denomination is born.

So that is my primary biblical claim: The act of crying out against injustice in persistent, stubborn and obstinate ways is a sacred speech act and it serves as a model for us. How then are we to interpret the claim?

Let's read the story as a positive message about the value of persistence. This is a valid reading of the text. Call it a surface reading, but still a perfectly legitimate reading. Persistence is an admirable trait. J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter was rejected by twelve publishers. Tom Kohnle's great grandfather survived two fires, the flood, a board of directors that tried to fire him, and 6 or 7 setbacks before successfully building Monarch Marking Company. We all love stories of persistence and they rightly motivate us to hang in there and not giving in, giving up, or giving out. This is a positive way to read today's parable. But it is only half of the story. The rest of the story is that we ought always to pray and never lose heart.

Now, please read the story as a powerful message about the value of crying out for justice. Read the story and the NT Epistle lessons as reminders that our basic resources for maintaining faith and being persistent are prayer and Scripture. Supported by prayer and Scripture, we are to cry out against injustice. Please note the drastic difference between the cry for justice with the cry of anger. One is a more legitimate, deeper pain. The other is the voice of the spoiled, the privileged, and the pampered. If the poor cry, they are called whiners. If the well-to-do cry, they are angry citizens demanding their rights. .

It is our turn to take up the sacred speech act of crying out against injustice. Here then is the homiletical interpretation of the story. Rather than take an individual approach, I want to consider a national approach and ask you to cry out relentlessly for the kind of country you want America to be. It is certainly acceptable to cry, "God bless America." Listen to the words of this prayer:

Give peace, O Lord, in all the world; **for only in you can we live in safety.** Lord, keep this nation under your care; **and guide us in the way of justice and truth.** Let your way be known upon earth; **your saving health among all nations.** Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten; **nor the hope of the poor be taken away.**

Let's make camp for a few minutes and consider this business of asking God to bless America. Please note what may only be described as irony as I try to reclaim the gospel portion of the heavily politicized "God bless America" movement. If you would Google

Dr. Jeremiah's Wright's sermon about "God damn America," you would discover that the sermon actually told a great truth in spite of his rhetorical choices. Some Americans want God to bless America simply because we are Americans. Let John the Baptist speak for all prophets: "God can raise us [sons and daughters of America] from these rocks."

There are times when I feel the weight of despair on my shoulders and I fear for the future of our country. When those times come, I am helped by hearing again great prophetic voices of protest in song and sermon. As an auditory learner, I am much more deeply moved by hearing than by reading texts. There is an honorable tradition in America of calling our country to account and to know that great privilege bestows upon us great accountability. Katherine Bates, in one of the great hymns of the Social Gospel, cries, America, America, Crown thy good with brotherhood [and sisterhood] from sea to shining sea. **America! America! God mend thine every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law! May God thy gold refine Till all success be nobleness And every gain divine! Till selfish gain no longer stain The banner of the free! Till nobler men keep once again Thy whiter jubilee!** In case we missed it, this hymn is more gospel than patriotism, more rooted in justice than jingoism.

Martin Luther King, Jr., one of our prophets, called us to account in his speech, "I Have a Dream": I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

And so let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring. And when this happens, when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*

So with all my heart and soul I pray for God to bless America. I want God to bless America. But it will take obedience to God. If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Blessing is tied to an America that not only hears the Word of God but obeys it. Blessing is tied to how well we treat the poor. "Blessed are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble." And the prophets pile up the practices that cause God to bless a nation: Blessing is tied to resisting injustice, observing the Sabbath, resisting temptation, trusting, observing justice, doing righteousness, and fearing the Lord.

And after this exemplary example of faithful crying, persistent faithfulness, by a powerless widow, what does Jesus ask? He asks WILL YOU KEEP THIS FAITH? Or will faith be overwhelmed by the cares of this world, the storms beating against our

houses, or the tides of change? Will secularism wipe out our faith? Will despair undermine our faith? My answer is NO. We will not be moved. We will not bow to the idols of the powers and principalities.

So put it all together with me. In a world of people who do not fear God or respect people, we will cry out for justice and righteousness. We will put our lives on the line in obedience to our God and cry out for God to bless America and the world. We will, above all, through all, and in spite of all, keep the faith and endure suffering. We will do the work of an evangelist and carry out our faith fully. Because when Jesus comes, no matter what, our faithfulness will be standing at attention greeting our Lord and our God!