

Sermon for Sunday October 21, 2007

Do Not Lose Heart

Rev. John Benham

Luke 18: 1-8

I'm guessing that everyone here this morning at some time or another has become discouraged from time to time. Just think of the Maple Leaf fans this morning. Every time I turn on the game it's the third period and they start losing. Our hope and promise of a better year is fading fast! So, let me begin with a funny email sent to me this week about an overly stressed Irish man.

Paddy was driving down the street in a sweat because he had an important meeting and couldn't find a parking place. Looking up to heaven he said, 'Lord take pity on me. If you find me a parking place I will go to Mass every Sunday for the rest of me life and give up me Irish whiskey!' Miraculously, a parking place appeared. Paddy looked up again and said, 'Never mind, I found one.'

Most of us, at one time or another in our lives, have hung on the edge of a promise delayed. "Daddy, when are we going to the hockey game? You promised we would go." "Yes, son. I promised. We will go. I told you we would go. We'll go."

Luke is writing to his church this passage, several generations after the life and death of Jesus.

To understand this passage is to realize that after Jesus' life of love and welcoming children, healing, betrayal, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, they had hung on the delicious promise that he would return. And they expected his return imminently. Mothers had rocked their children to sleep, reminding them that Jesus would return. People had encouraged one another, reminding them that although they were suffering as Christians in a world that persecuted them, Jesus would return.

Luke decides to remind his listeners of Jesus' strong advice to pray always and then Jesus tells them this unusual parable. There was a widow. The specifics of the woman's circumstance do not matter. What matters is that she is among those whom any **respectable judge** would be seriously obliged to help. But, as you noticed, this is no respectable judge. Jesus points out that this **judge neither fears God nor has any respect for people**. Not even a deserving widow is going to get a good hearing from him.

But, this is no ordinary widow. This woman is bold and brash, even uppity. She keeps demanding her justice even though her chances of success are little and none. And for a while, the judge refuses. But, finally, he relents, saying, "**I have**

no fear of God. I have no respect for anyone. But, I'm going to do what this woman asks, because she keeps bothering me." The Greek word translated "**wear me out**" literally means to "**strike under the eye**" or to "give a black eye." This woman's persistence convinces the judge that he doesn't need to be embarrassed within his community by this persistent widow.

Now, this parable is not **an allegory. God is not like a crusty old** judge who doesn't care. The form of the parable is from lesser to greater, theologian Fred Craddock says. **If a judge who does not care will do this for a widow woman, then how much more will God, who loves justice and does care, do for God's people?**

I think we often lose confidence in the gospel of Jesus. We think it doesn't matter and nothing will change. I often sense many of us in the United Church have given up on imagining a church where children are being children having fun and teens feeling they can find a haven from the pressures of the world. Pressures that say, "to be cool" is to take drugs or do what you can do to get high as the only way to have fun. Even I lose hope at times. I look at the transformations that happen as coach for my fourth year working a team of boys and girls. One of my greatest joys is seeing the change that takes place with persistent weekly practice and weekly games. This year I have two boys in Atom who have never played hockey before. One of them is the greatest track star and football player but he can barely skate. Yet to watch him sliding all over the ice saving goals and trying his best is pure joy. I can't help to imagine what's possible for this church if we were more persistent in our worship and prayer.

So, what do we do in our lives when we lose hope? Jesus says, "pray always" and remember he challenges us to "love our enemies". To listen to some in the world today, prayer is easy. To listen to some, prayer is the way we get our spiritual goodies. Or to listen to others, prayer is the way we get our material goodies. Or for others, prayer is the answer place, where God clearly addresses all of our questions and places our souls forever at ease. Maybe I've missed something, but I've never experienced prayer as a divine vending machine. Prayer has always cost me more than it's given. And, to my knowledge, prayer has never yielded me a car or a wad of bills or a parking place at the mall.

Prayer seems to humble me before God. Prayer helps me know that I don't have the answers and much of life is a mystery. There are parched places in my life today. There are answers I want that I have not yet been given. There are spots in my bones that are weary and places in my soul that are dry. So, what? Am I going to give up? Despair? Or am I going to pray for the persistence of that amazing widow?

Our Moderator of the United Church of Canada shares these thoughts in a recent letter to every congregation in the country calls us to pray in these changing times where families are stretched thin and churches are struggling with budgets

and how to be good news when so many churches are tired and weary. To be honest, not everyone is happy with this letter for various reasons, but I find hope and integrity in our Moderator's prayers. Let us listen to his words:

"Some of our congregations are struggling. Some are experiencing a renewal of Spirit. In either case our hope is not for our survival or even growth but in what God can accomplish through us. The book of Isaiah records a promise that we will flourish like a watered garden when we care for the homeless, hungry, and oppressed. The health and vitality of our congregations depends on our response to the suffering in the world around us. Jesus put it even more starkly: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35).

I am praying that more of us become concerned with Jesus' call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and visit those who are sick, lonely or in prison. I am praying our preoccupation with getting people into church is transformed by a passion for getting the church out into the world. I am praying that we welcome strangers with radical hospitality that sees in them the face of Christ – not an "identifiable giver" or a "potential committee member"! I am praying that our worries about buildings and budgets are overtaken by excitement for the mission of our church.

I do not know what that will look like, there in your community. Perhaps you do. I do know that it will involve risking familiar and precious belonging and customs.

I think I was elected Moderator because of three simple words that were put in me for our church: "Be not afraid".

The Right Rev. David Giuliano, Moderator of the United Church of Canada