

“Don’t lose heart!”

October 21, 2007

Text: Luke 18:1-8, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

I.

In our reading this morning from Luke’s gospel, Jesus has two messages of encouragement for us ...

1. We’re to stay strong in our prayer life (always a good idea).
2. And secondly, he says to us: ***Don’t lose heart!***

In other words, *hang in there* ... be strong in the faith. Again, be active in your prayer life ... and—through it all—***Don’t lose heart!***

The context for this is the people’s discouragement over the apparent delay of the *second coming*. Certainly with Paul in his earliest letters and with the gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel (to a lesser extent in Matthew and Luke), there was this expectation of Jesus’ return ... a day when God’s justice and goodness would come upon all the earth and a new day would be born.

Many scholars believe, and this would be my personal view, that the reality of the second coming is rooted in a *social hope*. The idea of a new day being born, a day when justice and goodness would pour over the earth, gave them hope.

Anyway, the people have apparently become discouraged about this, wondering when is this going to happen? Many thought it would happen in their life time.

II.

To lift their spirits, therefore, and to encourage them, Jesus tells them this strange parable about a *widow* and a *dishonest judge* and about their need to pray always and to ***not lose heart***.

This judge was, evidently, not a very upright person, respecting neither God nor other people. Still, he was a judge and he wasn’t impractical; nor was he stupid.

When a certain widow in the community keeps coming to him, pleading for justice against her opponent, at first he refuses, not giving her the time of day.

However, although widows in the Bible are among the most socially vulnerable of people—utterly powerless without their husband, this widow has a tenacious spirit. She doesn’t give up. Day after day, she implores the judge to grant her justice.

Finally, worn down by her constant pleas, the judge grants her justice. For him, it's a practical matter. He's tired of her nagging and protestations.

And Jesus concludes: *look at what the dishonest judge does* (This is a dishonest judge we're talking about; he's not a good person. Yet, he grants her justice.) ... *and will not God, therefore—all the more—grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, he adds, God will quickly grant justice to them.*

The point of the parable is obvious: *don't give up ...stay the course ...pray constantly ... and don't lose heart!*

III.

There are certain things in life—certain tasks, certain responsibilities—that we know we have to do; we have to follow through on them.

1. The hassle of health care issues comes to mind. Working things out with the health care providers (our health-care insurance companies).
 - a. Inaccurate charges and billing.
 - b. Trying to gain approval for one procedure or another.
 - c. Bickering over new changes to the coverage.

Sometimes it seems like it never ends ... endless phone calls ... being put on hold ... trying to find a human person to talk to (isn't that an aggravation?) ... then you fax them something, or email it, and somehow it gets lost.

Yet, what are you to do? You have to follow through. You, or a loved one, need the medical care.

DETAILS! The unending details of our lives. They make us nuts, don't they? But, hey, we're not to lose heart. We gotta do what we gotta do. Life is like that.

2. Or wrangling over home owner's insurance coverage ... indeed, trying to get the coverage to begin with.
3. Calling the credit card company to dispute a charge that appeared on your last statement.

Again, these are tasks we have to follow through on. If we don't, we get unfairly charged, or assessed ... or we don't receive the services we've paid for, that we deserve.

But still, they wear on us, don't they?

IV.

Then, always, there are the larger issues of our culture, of our American life—issues that weigh heavily on our conscience ...

- issues of public concern as we seek to make a better world ...
- issues that relate to the common good of our communities, our moral and ethical standards as a people.

Issues like the just an equitable treatment of all persons, in all socio-economic brackets. Still, across our land, and around the world, there are serious inequities that persist.

- In education ... with health care ... with employment opportunity.
- There are still places in our wider culture—situations—where bias and prejudice and bigotry prevail.
- Certainly, the church of Jesus Christ must always stand with the little guy, with the victims of the inequities—particularly the children—but it's hard work.

Look how long it took our nation to begin to resolve the stain of slavery in our national conscience! And we're still working on it, as we see with the Jena Six controversy up in the small town of Jena, Louisiana.

In the local high school, there was apparently a bench under a particular tree that had traditionally been for white students *only*. When a black student asked the administration about this and could he sit there, they gave him permission.

Imagine, coming to high school one day, as a young black student, in the United States of America, in 2007, and there are three hangman's nooses hanging from a tree on the school grounds! We can only shake our heads in dismay ... how sad ...

For all of us, in all of these areas of concern and responsibility, at times we get discouraged. We get beaten down by the sheer *inertia* of it all. *How long, Lord, how long, we wonder?*

At the same time, we know we have to pay close attention to our personal affairs while striving to be a good person on these larger issues. Many of us want to be progressive in our commitments to social justice but we get discouraged.

V.

To all of us, Jesus' words sound out: ***pray always ... and don't lose heart!***

Having an active and vibrant prayer life is obviously important. Why? Because it keeps us centered and focused. It keeps us centered on God ... and focused on the task at hand.

It does this, in part, by nudging us into the realm of the sacred where the Holy Spirit takes over, guiding us and nurturing us towards the ways of God's purposes.

Certainly, one of the goals of prayer is to bend our ways and our will towards God's ways. And along the way, through prayer, we're given new strength and new courage. Because in prayer, we're turning our concerns, our sorrows—whatever it is—over to God.

Prayer is not about *what we want*; it's about what *God wants for us*.

Constant, directed prayer, over time, helps us sort out our commitments and shape our values.

- Again, as the weeks unfold, what's important stays with us and comes to the fore, because it's revealing of God's purposes;
- and what is unimportant, or *excess baggage*, is discarded. It just happens that way; it's part of the process.

Check it out! Prayer is about believing that the way things are is NOT the way they always have to be. There's a vital impulse that runs through prayer that says: *things can change*.

VI.

All of which is a reminder, friends, that there are things in our lives that are worthy of our commitments. There are some causes and battles that we have to fight. To do otherwise would diminish ourselves as a people ... and certainly as people of faith.

About these causes, Jesus says, ***Don't lose heart!*** Continue to pray, staying close to God, and don't give up!

There are times when we need to hear such words of encouragement. We're all human. Now and then, the tidal waves of life wear on us. With health concerns ... financial concerns ... worries about a family member ... anxiety over what tomorrow will bring ... about how we will cope with this or that ...

We don't always know what to do or where to turn. Into our world of wonder ... doubt ... anxiety, even ... a Word from the Lord comes ...

Listen to 2 Timothy on this: *remember what your faith has taught you ...be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable*.

For all the time, the passing fancy or the deceptions or delusions of people will try to knock you off balance ... through greed ... or pride ... or wanting to be in control ... or to somehow promote or aggrandize themselves.

Easily, people (good people, even) forget. They forget and lose the vision ... and get all caught up in trends, new developments, or self-centered diversions, that run against God's purposes.

Again and again, therefore, we are challenged to *remember who we are*. And to **pray constantly ... be persistent ... and don't lose heart!**

VII.

God hears our prayers ... and understands our every need. As with the widow in our parable, sometimes our prayers need to activate our hands and feet. Sometimes we need to resolve, through our praying and our activism, to NOT take NO for an answer. If the answer really is NO, no doubt eventually we'll sort it out.

However, in the meantime, there are concerns and commitments in this life that merit our incessant praying.

In other words, pray and keep on praying. Ask and keep on asking. Don't take NO for an answer.

As Bruce Cockburn says in the song, *Lovers in a Dangerous Time*, sometimes **you have to kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight**.

And so, stay close to God, friends, and **don't lose heart**.

- At home ... in the work place ... in the grip of our deepest worries and fears, *stay close to God and don't lose heart*.
- With whatever you are dealing this day, *hold fast* to your core self and to your core belief ... *stay close to God and don't lose heart*.
- When the voices of the world rise up too strongly in your spirit ... when uncertainty about today evaporates the hope out of tomorrow, *stay close to God and don't lose heart*.

We lift up our eyes to the hills, says the Psalmist, from where does our help come? Our help comes from the Lord ...the Lord is our constant hope and salvation!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
On the web at www.mlcchurch.com

