

“The Good Fight”

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Genesis 32:22-31

Luke 18:1-8

[Jesus said,]

“For a while [the unjust judge] refused; but afterward he said to himself,
‘Though I neither fear God nor regard man,
yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her,
or she will wear me out by her continual coming.’”

Luke 18:4-5

Let us pray... O God,
Though we would prefer all people to get along,
strengthen us with resolve to fight ‘the good fight’ –
in accordance with your will for justice & peace.

Amen

Our gospel lesson today is another one of Jesus’ parables
that may be best understood as a humorous story –
an example of a joke at the expense of authority figures.
I could imagine this woman petitioning the unjust judge for her cause
by bringing him gifts of soup and baked goodies
to win sympathy for her case –
enough to be cute, but well short of a ‘conflict of interest’
let alone a bribe.

The real point of course is that she is relentless in her pursuit to get justice,
despite the judge’s reputation for being unsympathetic and ‘unjust’.
It is her persistence that carries the day...

We must not assume that authority figures in Jesus’ parables
directly correspond to that of God.

Kings, absentee landlords, and in this case a judge, are characters
that would have been recognizable to those who heard them in Jesus’ day.
Theologian and author, Megan McKenna, claims that people in the Third World –
like the peasant people of Jesus’ day, would see such privileged people
as part of their problem.

The poor, the marginalized, the uninvited, the unwelcome
would know what it means to have a tough judge and unsympathetic leaders.

Speaking of unsympathetic leaders –
that pretty much sums up how many of us feel about our leaders
in Washington, DC after 16 days of the Government’s ‘shutdown’.

Willard, p.2

Majority Leader of the House of Representatives, Rep. John Boehner, said,
“We fought the good fight, we just didn’t win.”

The ‘good fight’ he was referring to was the effort to defund
the Affordable Care Act – the controversial healthcare law.

That fight was set aside – for the time being,
as the Senate brokered a plan to reopen our government.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren said she’s relieved the shutdown is over,
but will not celebrate – because according to the Standard & Poor index,
\$24 billion dollars of revenue was lost from the nation’s economy
and the Senate agreement is only a temporary fix.

<https://jhaines6.wordpress.com/2013/10/17/presstv-sp-shutdown-cost-us-24-billion/>

The fight is not over and it remains to be seen if this is a ‘good fight’...

What constitutes a ‘good fight’?

Certainly in this situation people on both sides of the controversy
passionately believe they are right.

In contrast with the inaction of Congress –

last week, the Medal of Honor was awarded to CPT William Swenson,
a US Army infantry officer for his actions at a place
called Gangjal in Afghanistan in 2009.

A troop column that included 106 US marines, US soldiers,
and Afghan coalition forces was ambushed on three sides
by Taliban fighters – killing four Americans in the lead.

CPT Swenson rallied his troops for a counter attack,
coordinated air support and evacuation, then twice took vehicles
into the ambush zone to rescue friendly forces, wounded and dead.

A significant detail about the character of CPT Swenson
was recorded in a video as he loaded his mortally wounded First Sergeant
onto a helicopter, kissing him on the forehead
before returning to the fight.

Though he had returned fire and tossed a grenade
in defiance to the Taliban’s call for surrender,
it is not for killing anyone that he was recognized for heroism,
but rather for placing himself at risk for the sake of the people in his care.
He was a good shepherd that day.

Another person who stands in sharp contrast
to the unfortunate events of indecision in Washington last week,
was the Chaplain of the Senate, Barry C. Black, who delivered
a daily prayer each morning in the Senate chamber.

He is a US Navy veteran with the rank of vice admiral and the first
African-American and 7th Day Adventist minister to serve in this role.

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Chaplain Black's prayers went beyond soothing platitudes to become reprimands of lawmakers' hypocrisy and negligence...

His prayers were quite daring and hit close to home when he prayed to God, saying,

"Remove from them that stubborn pride, which imagines itself to be above and beyond criticism."

"Deliver us from the hypocrisy of attempting to sound reasonable while being unreasonable,"

"Remove the burdens of those who are the collateral damage of this government shutdown."

The House of Representatives, even though they have their own chaplain, also invited Chaplain Black to pray with them.

CPT Swenson's actions are more readily recognized as the classic idea of a 'hero' – someone who is courageous actions in mortal combat.

But Chaplain Black's 'actions' are more to the point of Jesus' teaching, demonstrating courageous determination through prayer.

Still, both individuals sought to do what was right for the sake of others.

The power of prayer is something we should not underestimate.

Jesus began his parable by talking about the need for persistence in prayer. This does not assume God is reluctant to hear or is slow to answer prayer, but the persistence to pray is about the struggle it takes for anyone to seek God in prayer.

The story of Jacob wrestling with the angel is a metaphor for this struggle – Jacob was indeed wrestling with a hard decision in his life.

He had been away for many years, out of fear of what his brother would do to him, for Jacob had swindled his brother, Esau, out of his inheritance.

Jacob returns a rich man with 12 children and two wives, many servants, and a herd of many animals.

He leaves them all on one side of the river, but crosses back to the other side, and there he struggles with a man who is not named.

However, it is implied that Jacob is struggling with an angel representing God, and even when he has been beaten down to the ground, hip out joint, he still hangs on demanding a blessing.

It is really kind of a funny scene when you think of it, especially as Jacob asks who his opponent is – and he is told: "You know."

Willard, p.4

The word for 'prayer' in Greek is literally translated as, 'to approach'.

We approach God through prayer

even when we feel empty and far from the presence of God.

The struggle is in the 'persistent effort' to seek God in prayer,

not as a feeling, a dramatic vision, but as a willingness to believe,

a determination to make room for God, believing God already present.

An excellent devotional for daily prayer, "Jesus Calling",

written by Sarah Young, a former missionary, speaks to this very issue.

Her essays are written as if God is speaking in the first person.

Here is a portion of one of her devotionals:

Go gently through this day, keeping your eyes on Me.

I will open up the way before you,

as you take steps of trust along your path.

Sometimes the way before you is blocked.

If you focus on the obstacle or search for a way around it,

you will probably go off course.

Instead focus on Me, the Shepherd who is leading you along your life-journey.

Before you know it, the "obstacle" will be behind you

and you will hardly know how you passed through it.

'Go gently thorough this day keeping your eyes on me....

the obstacle will be behind you' before you know it...

This is true for CPT Swenson when his focus was not killing the Taliban,
but saving the lives of his troops.

This was true for Chaplain Black when he spoke, keeping his focus
on what was best for the American people and

not the partisan issues over the Affordable Care Act.

The 'good fight' must include both courage and compassion

as well as persistence in maintaining one's focus.

Through persistence,

the widow in Jesus' parable story, sought justice from an unjust judge.

Through persistence ,

Jacob fought to obtain God's blessing and protection for his family

as he returned to an uncertain meeting with his brother.

Through persistence,

CPT Swenson fought to save the lives of his people,

at great personal risk while under fire on the battlefield.

Through persistent prayer,

Chaplain Black fought to keep the focus on the government's role

to serve the people, by his daily criticism and challenges to the Senate.

Willard, p.5

In the devotional, “Jesus Calling”,
we are warned that there will be obstacles.
But if we keep our focus on God, who is our highest good –
no matter what our ‘battlefield’ is about,
then we won’t get sidetracked into bitter dispute.

These people examples for us of someone
who is persistent in the face of opposition
to do what is just, to seek a blessing, to respond in emergency,
to challenge the status quo.

How do you need to fight the good fight?

Whether we are standing up for our rights about medical decisions,
standing up for our rights as a female, or as a gay person –
even as a straight white male,
the way of love is always the right focus and the right way
to fight the ‘good fight’.

At the end of Jesus’ parable, he asks
if there will be any faith found in Israel?
That same question applies to each of us in our time:
Will we be ‘faithful’ in seeking God’s way?
Will we be persistent to do the right thing?
Amen

*Our lesson today from Genesis 32:22-31 tells of a strange meeting
the night before Jacob's fateful return to meet his brother Esau –
whom he cheated out of his inheritance many years before...*

22-23 Jacob got up in the middle of the night
and took his wives, his eleven children, and everything he owned
across to the other side of the Jabbok River for safety.

24 Afterwards, Jacob went back and spent the rest of the night alone.
A man came and fought with Jacob until just before daybreak.

25 When the man saw that he could not win,
he struck Jacob on the hip and threw it out of joint.

26 They kept on wrestling until the man said,
“Let go of me! It's almost daylight.”

“You can't go until you bless me,”
Jacob replied.

27 Then the man asked,
“What is your name?”

“Jacob,”
he answered.

28 The man said,
“Your name will no longer be Jacob.
You have wrestled with God and with men, and you have won.
That's why your name will be Israel.”

29 Jacob said,
“Now tell me your name.”

“Don't you know who I am?”
he asked. And he blessed Jacob.

30 Jacob said,
“I have seen God face to face, and I am still alive.”
So he named the place Peniel.

31 The sun was coming up as Jacob was leaving Peniel.
He was limping because he had been struck on the hip...

Luke 18:1-8

[1] And [Jesus] told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

[2] He said,

"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man;

[3] and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.'

[4] For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself,

'Though I neither fear God nor regard man,

[5] yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'"

[6] And the Lord said,

"Hear what the unrighteous judge says.

[7] And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?

[8] I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Inspired by Luke 18:1-8

And telling them a parable about

how they ought to pray without giving up, Jesus said,

“There was a certain judge in a certain city

who neither feared God nor cared about people.

There was also a widow in that city who came to him, saying,

‘Your Honor, give me justice against my accuser!’

‘Your Honor, vindicate me against their accusations!’

‘Your Honor, do the right thing in helping me against my foes!’

And he refused to do this – for awhile,

but after this kind of thing went on and on over a period of time,

he said to himself,

‘Because this woman is annoying me no end,

I will hear her case – otherwise she will wear me out

with her persistence!’

Listen to what this unjust judge says,

because God will not fail to advocate for those who are beloved –

and who call out day and night as God patiently guides them.

I tell you God will be right on time to help them –

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man, the True Heir of Humanity,

finally arrives, will faith be found anywhere on the Earth?”