

Pentecost 19C (10/20/2019)

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

We're called to pray with our hands and feet for the sake of God's justice. But, what enables people of faith to pray and work persistently, and not to lose heart? If our security comes from the approval of others – if we are most concerned with garnering esteem – then we will forever hedge our bets. But, if we are secure in our worthiness, our status as beloved in God's sight, then we can be bold in demanding the abundant life that God intends for all of God's beloved, and especially the most vulnerable.

When Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel returned from Selma, Alabama, in 1965, having taken part in the famous march led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., someone asked him, “Did you find much time to pray, when you were in Selma?” Rabbi Heschel responded, “I prayed with my feet.”¹ For people of faith engaged in the movement for Civil Rights, in other words, prayer was more than a private appeal to God; marching for justice was also a form of prayer, and perhaps the most fitting kind of prayer for the moment at hand.

Of course, the march for justice continues. Our alertness to the world's many injustices takes a toll, and we may wonder if God's dream for a world restored can ever be realized. For this reason, disciples in every generation need the kind of encouragement we hear in our Gospel from Luke today, Jesus' parable “about [the] need to pray always and not to lose heart.”

An unjust judge ignores the cries of a widow in his midst until she finally wears him down with her tenacity and he grants her the justice she demands. It's

¹ Rabbi David Kalb, <https://www.centralsynagogue.org/news/detail/pray-with-your-feet>.

an illustration of the old adage that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. But, it's also a case for the faithfulness of God. *If even an unjust judge will grant justice to a widow out of sheer exasperation, Jesus contends, how much more readily will God, who is fundamentally just, respond to your cries for justice?* It follows that **people of faith should be bold and persistent in prayer – prayer that comes to full expression in our actions – all the while trusting that in time God's kingdom will come on Earth as in heaven.**

I like to imagine Jesus' story as if it's being told in a series of icons that depict the widow calling the judge out repeatedly throughout his day. The first icon shows her outside his bedroom window waking him up in the morning; the second shows her interrupting his breakfast; the next is a scene of her trailing behind him as he makes his way to the courtroom; then a scene of her shouting him down as he tries to pass a different judgment; and so on. In spite of his utter lack of respect for the abundance of Jewish law protecting orphans and widows, the judge ultimately concedes. He simply can't stand any more of the widow's badgering.

What is it that motivates people to pursue justice with such single-mindedness and disregard for decorum? The widow clearly doesn't care what other people think of her; she has only one objective and she intends to achieve it no matter what.

Urgency certainly plays a role. The widow has no choice but to put herself out there. To borrow the words of one interpreter, "The judge is her sole hope of

securing justice, and persistence is her only recourse.”² This is also the case for historical movements for justice. Think of people occupying lunch counters in the South, sitting silently without being served until they’re assailed with insults and blows, and finally arrested for breaking segregation laws. Who would endure such mistreatment? Only those who believe public confrontation is the last course of action available to them.

But urgency in and of itself cannot sustain a movement for justice. **In light of the inevitable resistance, how do you imagine proponents of justice have managed to persist, and not to lose heart?**

Fannie Lou Hamer was born the daughter of sharecroppers in Mississippi in 1917. Incensed by injustices she had experienced in her own life as well as ongoing efforts to deny the vote to African Americans, she became a political organizer in 1961 and eventually rose to prominence in the Civil Rights movement. She struggled mightily for many years as a champion for political rights, particularly the right to representation in Mississippi’s delegations to the Democratic National Convention.³

Predictably, Hamer faced opposition at every turn. Yet, she did not allow abuse and violence to derail her. “Sometimes it seem like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed,” she said. “But if I fall, I’ll fall five feet four inches

² R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 337.

³ <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/fannie-lou-hamer>.

forward in the fight for freedom. I'm not backing off.”⁴ She knew the justice of her cause, and no scheming, no shaming, no intimidation could stop her. **Her resolve was rooted in a sense of dignity and purpose that could not be shaken.**

Dear church, **dignity and purpose are the currency of faith.** Claimed by God in Christ, you are precious. And, when you bring yourself to accept your own inherent value, your eyes are opened to the inherent value of others. But, the struggle to uphold the dignity of marginalized people is guaranteed to run up against resistance. “You have to be so secure in your own worth and belovedness,” a colleague of mine reflected this week, “because others won’t grant it to you.”⁵

We’re called to pray with our hands and feet for the sake of God’s justice, to be persistent and not to lose heart. But if our security comes from the approval of others – if we are most concerned with garnering esteem – then we will forever hedge our bets. If, on the other hand, we are secure in our worthiness, our status as beloved in God’s sight, then we can be bold in demanding the abundant life that God intends for all of God’s beloved, and especially the most vulnerable.

⁴ <https://www.becauseofthemwecan.com/blogs/culture/10-fannie-lou-hamer-quotes-to-celebrate-her-100th-birthday>.

⁵ Shalom Agtarap, Preaching Peace table, Tacoma, WA, 10/15/19.