

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

TAKE HEART

Luke 18:1-8

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost Analysis by Ron Starenko

1Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' 4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" 6And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

DIAGNOSIS: Losing Heart

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Breaking Down*

Of all the sicknesses in the world, reaching epidemic proportions, the worst is losing heart. It is estimated that one out of four persons today is under treatment for some kind of mental illness or emotional disorder, often leading to suicide, drug addiction, alcoholism and chronic depression, a breakdown

in a person's inner structures, a loss of heart. On a less clinical level multitudes of people have no heart for work, for school, for marriage, for participating in community life, even for life itself. Alarmed, people throw up their hands in disgust or despair, disillusioned by our loss of the sacredness of life or the mounting corruption in our social and political institutions, a breaking down, if not a breaking apart, of our culture.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Giving Up*

At another level, as Jesus observed, people suffer a loss of heart, giving up on God. Many today have concluded, given our weakness of heart, that God is no longer a factor in our confusing world. Given the pain that exists in the world, we cry out against God, whom we quickly come to believe is too remote, too uncaring to be bothered with us. Jesus' contemporaries were losing heart, having experienced national disasters during a millennium of their history, exile and enslavement, their hopes of a coming kingdom of peace and prosperity now almost a forgotten dream. Here are God's chosen people losing their grip on the promise, no longer able to believe and to pray with confidence and trust.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Losing Out*

The situation, for Israel then and for us today, is so grim that the very kingdom which God has prepared for us would come and we wouldn't know it or see it. Our hearts might be so far from God's promises that we are in danger of losing out altogether, as Jesus gives warning of such a possibility with the question, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth" (v. 8)? It may not occur to us that at all the levels of losing heart, from our daily disillusionments, to our spiritual crises, leading to the fatal sin of forsaking God, we meet the God who has a problem with us, the Judge—and a righteous one, to be sure. To lose out before the living God is as bad as it gets.

PROGNOSIS: Having a Heart

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Granting Justice*

All of which leaves us without a prayer, if that then is the end of the story. Fortunately, the story that Jesus tells to any and all who are losing heart, requiring some interpretation, is really good news. Here is a widow, with little leverage to wrest justice (v. 3) from her oppressive landlord, only to discover that the judge to whom she appeals her case rules favorably toward the landlord. But, lo and behold, the judge finally relents, because the feisty widow refuses to take No for an answer. This is Jesus' reply, not just concerning the matter of praying in general, but specifically to the issue of waiting for an answer to the petition, "Thy kingdom come." Some Pharisees (17:20) were asking Jesus "when the kingdom of God was coming." That is what their heart was set on, what they were praying for, and now watching and waiting, as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem ((17:11). Little did they know that the kingdom was already present among them, that it was about to break in decisively upon the whole world in the events of Good Friday and Easter, about which Jesus predicted while on the way (18:31-33). Vindication, Jesus is saying, is on the way (v. 7-8). God's justice will be meted out, first by crucifixion, when the power of sin will be replaced by forgiveness, then by resurrection and ultimately return, when a new order of life will arrive. In other words, Jesus tells his contemporaries, even as he pleads with us today, "Take heart," for God has a heart for you and will not renege on promises made long ago. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells the paralytic, "Stand up, take your bed and go to your home," and "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven" (Matt. 9:2, 6). And to the woman suffering from a hemorrhage, he says, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well" (Matt. 9:22). What Jesus promises is that in the here and now we have already what is not yet. In the end God will "grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night" (v. 7). Jesus

himself is already the down-payment on that deal.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Holding Up*

Taking heart is what faith, and prayer for that matter, is all about, hanging on to the promise no matter what. Faith, and therefore prayer, too, is not for getting immediate gratification, though that might happen, but far more for getting through over the long haul. If God were like the heartless and unjust judge, who didn't care much for the widow's plight and plea, answering us only because we wore God down with our pestering (v. 4-5), we would have reason to lose heart. As it is, since Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit through whom the kingdom of grace and life has arrived, we are able to pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," waiting for the final outcome, "the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." Even though we continue to wait for the day when all trouble and sorrow are gone forever, all wrongs righted, all promises fulfilled, when it does happen, we will conclude that it came "quickly" (v. 8) enough.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Having a Heart*

In the meantime, with one eye on the horizon, God's future for us, we get to turn the other eye on the here and now, to the creation and the world community, destined to be transformed. If we believe "in the resurrection of the body," we have a heart not so much for individual survival but for the renewal of all that God has made. We work, therefore, to heal the structures of our communal life, whether it's our politics, the care of the earth, family life, racial justice, or feeding the poor. In a world where there seems to be little reason, little heart, for what is truly important, we get to be people with hearts full of love and hope, respecting all things good, as feisty widows, like Jesus, who fear and love God, having respect for all people.