

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
October 17, 2010
Luke 18:1-8

“Plant Sequoias”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

The Gospel of Luke was written in about 80 C.E. That is about 50 years after Jesus’ death. By the time Luke was written, the early Christians were starting to feel discouraged. They had thought Jesus was going to return, and quickly, so where was he? They were tired of waiting for him to return and bring all things to fulfillment, the deepest hope of their hearts. They were tired of being oppressed and persecuted as a tiny minority in the big, powerful Roman Empire. They were anxious and suffering, restless and discouraged.

Today’s story from the Book of Luke about the widow repeatedly asking the judge for justice is often read as an instruction to “nag” God with our requests so that God will eventually give in and give us what we want. But I do not believe that Jesus told this parable to teach us the lesson that it is good to nag and we should improve our nagging skills.

Remember the story...

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.

That is the story. But I omitted the opening line of the passage which summarizes Jesus’ intent—the point behind the parable. That introductory sentence, presumably written by Luke, is: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” I think THERE lies the heart of the parable. I think the parable is about time...learning to pray always, to work for justice, and not to lose heart and get discouraged over time.

We lose heart when we live solely within OUR time, human time, also known as chronos, as opposed to divine time, God's time, also known as kairos.

If we live solely in chronos—human time, the time of clocks, watches, calendars, deadlines, and news cycles—we can and we do grow weary and discouraged. BUT if we step back and believe that there is a time beyond time, an arc of time we cannot see or experience, then we can let go of discouragement and we are able to do what must be done without believing we will witness the outcome of our good efforts, our strong prayers, and our diligent work.

If we live in chronos time—human, calendar, clocks and watches time—it is nearly impossible NOT to get discouraged: our country is involved in two wars, we are facing severe climate change and environmental degradation, the scourge of AIDS continues almost unabated in sub-Saharan Africa, the animosity and violence in the Middle East is ongoing, and the list continues...

If we live solely in chronos time, we cannot help but throw up our hands, throw down the newspaper and announce, "I give up. It's hopeless. The world is going to hell in a hand basket and there's nothing I can do about it."

But if we understand and appreciate that we ALSO live in kairos time, God's time, we can take the long view and keep on keeping on.

"The arc of the universe is long," Martin Luther King Jr. told his discouraged followers, "but it bends toward justice." How right he was.

The arc of the universe is long, and no one ever guaranteed us that we would individually see the results of our good work. But we are called to engage, actively, with commitment and passion, in good work for justice and for peace believing that the long arc of the universe bends toward justice because each of us does our small but important part.

"Everything you do will seem insignificant," Gandhi once said, "but it is very important that you do it."

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The story of the widow and the judge is not about helping us to become better nags, it is about helping us to hold on. It is about encouraging us to ask for justice, to work for justice, to dream of justice, to believe in justice and to fight for justice OVER TIME, over the long haul. I think the take-home lesson is: work with diligence in the short term, AND hold on with hope to the long view.

I think that as Christians we are called to do just that and it is hard and paradoxical. We are called to work with diligence in the short term, AND hold on with hope to the long view.

We are called to work on projects and causes and movements in the short term without ever believing we will see the fruits of our labor in the short term.

We are called to care about and invest in the state of the world without being completely in the world. As people of faith often say: we are to be IN the world but not be OF the world.

*Courage sister, don't grow weary,
We sang together earlier today.
Courage brothers, don't grow weary,
You sang with such full voices
Courage people, don't grow weary,
Sisters, brothers, all.*

Don't grow weary my precious ones.
Don't agree with the pundits who say American periodically suffer from compassion fatigue. Maybe some do. But we are people of faith and we don't grow weary of supporting people in Haiti, praying for people on the Gulf Coast, caring about people in Pakistan since the flood.
We've got the long view. We specialize in stamina.
We are in the endurance business.

In the Jewish tradition, the Talmud teaches: "It is not your responsibility to fully complete the work of repair, but neither are you free to cease from doing it."
Pirke Avot 2:16

We do not have to finish the work. That is not our job or responsibility. And often that is simply not possible.
But we are responsible for doing our part, our small and important part.

We work for justice and for peace knowing that if we measure our success in chronos time, human time, we will grow discouraged. But if we accept that we also live in kairos time, God's time, we can keep on continue with a light in our eyes and optimism in our hearts.

Remember the words spoken by Mother Theresa: "We are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful."

And we're good at that—good at being faithful, good at working in the short term while holding on to the long view. Good at putting our shoulders to the plow and working hard, not expecting to see the results of our efforts in our lifetimes.

Marion Wright Edelman, who spent decades working for the welfare of poor children and families, understood that we must continue even when we cannot see the direct impact of our work. She said, “We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.”

And so we join with Marion Wright Edelman and Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King and Gandhi and all the widows and saints, activists and organizers, dreamers and visionaries who have during their lifetimes done their part working hard in the short term but not expecting rewards, thanks or even the satisfaction of seeing the fruits of their labor.

Poet Audre Lorde said, “I have to cast my lot with those / who age after age, perversely, / with no extraordinary power, / reconstitute the world.”

We're casting our lot with the widow who asked the unjust judge over and over again for justice. We're with her, she's with us, we cast our lot with ALL the disenfranchised who seek justice and work for peace. We cast our lot with those who work with diligence in the short term, holding on with hope to the long view.

Many years ago Winston Churchill was asked to give the Commencement address at the Harrow Boarding School in England, which he had attended. When it was time for his speech, Churchill stood up, went to the mic, and said, “Never give up, never give up, never give up.” And then he sat back down. Expecting a long, flowery Commencement speech, the crowd was silent. But Churchill just sat there. He had said all he needed to say. Eventually the crowd began to applaud.

Courage sisters, don't grow weary. Courage brothers, don't grow weary.
Work with diligence in the short term, hold on with hope to the long view. You understand this. You do this. We are community. We help one another with this paradoxical way of living. And this paradox, this tension that we live and breathe—work hard in the short term, hold on to the long view—is captured in a poem by the poet, philosopher and theologian (I think) Wendell Berry. The poem is called “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” Listen to an excerpt:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion - put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering

of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.

So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

We remember the words of the prophets—both ancient prophets and
contemporary—that urge us to invest in today always keeping an eye on tomorrow.
Like the widow nagging the judge for justice, we work with perseverance and
stamina for a just and peaceful world.

We remember that the arc of the universe is long...
We remember that everything we do will seem insignificant, but it is very
important that we do it.
We remember to cast our lot with those who age after age try to reconstitute the
world.
We remember to dream, to hold on, to take heart.
AND to plant sequoias.
Amen.