

Sermon October 16, 2016 Keep your eyes on the prize Cara Hochhalter

Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Luke 18:1-8

Music has always been a way to speak out about injustice... Molly writes songs about the earth and peace...I think of the songs of the Civil Rights movement, and the songs of Pete Seeger that covered the range from workers' rights to the environment to anti-war songs....and particular attention is being given right now to Bob Dylan, who just won the Nobel Peace Prize for his amazing lyrics that many of us learned, even if we didn't know they were his...."Where have all the flowers gone?" "The times, they are a'changin'" Remember that one?

*Come gather 'round people where ever you roam---And admit that the waters around you have grown--And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone--
If your time to you is worth savin'—Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone, For the times they are a' changin'!*

I had a history teacher in high school who played us a song ... sung by Joan Baez....but Bob Dylan wrote it called: *With God on our side*...a powerful lens of how people on both sides of wars, fought through the centuries...have believed that God was on *their* side. One verse goes like this: *The First World War, boys---It came and it went---The reason for fighting---I never did get---But I learned to accept it---Accept it with pride---For you don't count the dead--When God's on your side.*

The song goes on: *In many a dark hour, I've been thinkin' about this. That Jesus Christ was betrayed by a kiss, but I can't think for you, you'll have to decide, whether Judas Iscariot ---Had God on his side.* And Dylan ends with these powerful words: *If God's on our side, he'll stop the next war.*

Let us be in prayer: Justice-seeking God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

I am pretty sure that we sing these songs...because we have something of God's word written on our hearts. The prophet Jeremiah whom we have been hearing about the last few weeks as he talked to those exiled Israelis who had been sent to Babylon....Jeremiah says the "Times they are a'changing!" Listen again: This prophet quotes God, saying that the days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant...it will not be like the old one that people broke...this one will be written on their hearts...and they will know me...from the least to the greatest....all people will know me in their hearts."

Do you have God written in your heart...I bet you do...I bet we all have God's grace, God's infinite love, God's creative luring.... written on our hearts... Perhaps it is a longing for fairness, for truth-telling,....perhaps it comes with the pain you feel at the news of others' suffering...or even in the moments of joy over something beautiful....listen to your heart for a moment...what has God written there?

The other day Barbara Turner Delisle, the minister of the Montague Congregational Church invited me to walk the new labyrinth in their church yard. Simple yet intricate...when I walked the winding grassy path lined with bricks...something in my heart seemed to move, to open up bit...I don't know exactly...but at that same moment, I noticed a red leaf in the path that indeed, was shaped like a heart. *Listen to your heart*...God seemed to be telling me.

And I think it is this Sacred longing in our hearts that call out songs...songs for justice where there is injustice, songs for peace where there is war....and songs about love.

Now, Jesus told this parable about a woman, a widow and a judge...so that the people would not "lose heart!" The story goes that there was a judge who you might say was "hard-hearted" and did not respect people nor God.

Now you have to remember that widows had a hard time in the days of the first century...if their husband who had passed on did not have a brother to take care of her, a woman was sometimes left destitute. John Pilch writes that the "word for 'widow' in Hebrew scripture means 'silent one' or 'one unable to speak.' "

Thank goodness we have a lot of widows today who can and do speak out...I think of the 'raging grannies' who protest against war and so many older women, including some of you, who let your voices be heard about issues that are important to you! But we know that there are still those in our cultures who are without voice.

The woman in the parable decided to do something about it and goes to this inconsiderate judge. She begs and begs...perhaps she held protest marches, got others to carry signs in front of the judge's office... perhaps she got them to sing songs? *We shall overcome....come on, widows...this is just not right! So many songs to be sung!*

And finally the judge says..."I do not want to be bothered with this woman anymore...all her noise is bad for my reputation....I will grant her justice so that she will not wear me out!" Jesus....is on the widow's side in this parable...what does this say about Jesus...and about justice?

Jesus did not often explain his parables....so I think the next piece in the text was added by someone later and perhaps it detracts from the focus on justice. See what you think. It says that Jesus told them to listen to what the unjust judge has said and think about how much God will grant justice to those who cry to him day and night? If you pray harder and louder, God will hear you and not delay in helping you! So many sermons have explained this parable as being about prayer...about God eventually hearing you and answering you if you keep asking....well that may be one interpretation....

But since Jesus repeatedly called for justice for widows, orphans, the poor and the sick; I do not want to turn this parable into some nice words about praying harder... even as I do believe that prayer invites grace and motivates action. But the widow's persistence around what was not right about her society...should also be our persistence today... in our prayers *and* our actions!

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that even though society may have told this widow that she was a nobody without a voice...she knew otherwise! Taylor says that by telling it to the judge over and over, *she remembered the shape of her heart*! Maybe this is the lesson for each of us...speak our truth, let our longings for justice and fairness be heard...that we, too, might remember the shape of our hearts...hearts that hold the word of God in love and mercy....and know that others, too, hold God in their hearts!

Kathryn Matthews thinks this is a lesson about God...she says Jesus was asking them to look at the comparison...if a nasty old judge who admittedly did not respect people nor God, if even he finally succumbs to doling out what was right...then think how much a loving God will respond to the needs of those who hurt. How much more, a God whose word written on our hearts...will listen and *be with us* in our struggles for the dream.

And what is God's dream, the vision, the ideal for which we all long? The song said: *Keep our eyes on the prize and hold on!*...What is the prize? How do you imagine a just world? I see changes happening in our own cities and communities that do move us forward...I see these changes in our own young people and young adults... At the conference I just went to, churches in our state are initiating some amazing efforts... towards peace/love and justice in their own communities...and millennials are joining, in fact many are *leading* the changes.

We are called to hold up this vision...to act on it, to live it, to speak out about it...and even to sing it! Here is Bryan Sirchio's song again:

Chorus: Dream God's dream
Holy Spirit, help us dream...
Of a world where there is justice, and where everyone is free
To build and grow and love
And to simply have enough
The world will change when we dream God's dream.

And lastly...the parable asks if we will be able to hold on to this faith? Marcus Borg says that faith is not about what you say you believe in...he says you can say all the right words and still be miserable....faith is not a set of claims ... Faith is simply trusting something bigger. Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher, said that faith as trust is like floating on a deep ocean...if you struggle, you sink...but if you can relax... then you can float. Floating on faith.

Relaxing into prayer...knowing that faith is about trust and relationship...however the words look like that you wrap around them. It takes faith to stand up for justice... to sing out with compassion...to draw from God's word on our heart to open doorways for God's dream to unfold.

Amen.