

“When Faith is Prayer (Justice)”

On March 25, 1807, the Abolition Act became law in Great Britain and slavery was abolished. Although the trade in slaves had become illegal in British ships, slavery remained a reality in British colonies. A man named William Wilberforce was convinced that the institution of slavery should be entirely abolished, but understood that there was little political will for emancipation. Wilberforce spent his entire life and political career towards the goal of emancipation. This year, as Britain marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, the media have led the way in the celebration to the point of releasing the movie *Amazing Grace*. The story told of Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce is one of deep faith, persistent prayer and achieved justice.

Wilberforce became a member of Parliament in early adulthood, but initially had no particular interest in religion or social justice. Then one Easter when he was in his late 20's, a powerful religious experience changed his perception of life's purpose, and he began to see his place in Parliament not so much as a career but as God's calling. He began to set his mind to various issues of justice taking on the cause of abolition and emancipation. Seeing the slave trade abolished was far from a swift victory. Campaigning for nearly 20 years, Wilberforce was repeatedly obstructed by members of Parliament who had vested interests in slavery, was interrupted by the country going to war, and was dogged by frequent illnesses that confined him to bed for weeks at a time.

Then in 1825, Wilberforce resigned from the House of Commons. He enjoyed a quiet retirement although he suffered financial difficulties. His last public appearance was at a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1830, at which he took the chair. In parliament, the Emancipation Bill gathered support and received its final commons reading on July 26, 1833. Slavery would be abolished, but the owners would be heavily compensated. “Thank God,” said Wilberforce, “that I have lived to witness a day in which England is willing to give twenty million sterling for the Abolition of Slavery”. Three days later, William Wilberforce died.

I lead with this very brief account of a great story about a strong principled person with persistent faith, because I doubt there is a person here who has not felt, as Wilberforce did, the weight of life's challenges pressed down hard upon your shoulders. I doubt there is any one here who has not been exposed to or had to bear up under the heaviness of life's tragedies, and did not come away with lingering thoughts of doubt and feelings hopelessness. In the scheme of life, no one is immune ... even people of faith. Each day is a battle! Whether we win the day or lose momentum, depends on what we bring to the battle ... may even determine the outcome for tomorrow. There are decisions to be made ... actions to be seized ... courses to be run ... responsibilities to be taken.

In the back of our minds there is a question not far off ... have I the strength to face another day? Have I the reserves to go into tomorrow? What of my courage ... my resolve? The stuff that life sometimes lays upon us is enough to cause us to lay down and die. How does God expect us to live with all the trials and tribulations we face? How does God expect us to keep faith when there is so much chaos and darkness, mental illness and human dysfunction surrounding our life? How does God expect us to be joyful and sing His praises, when life continues to heap upon us the insanity of other people's behavior? So many of our daily experiences exasperate us and leave us exhausted ... even our faith is weakened and we are left thinking ... “Where is the justice in all this?”

In today's Gospel lesson, we meet a very persistent woman! She is a widow, which means in her day, she is somebody who has little hope. She has no one to protect her ... no one to defend her ... nobody to look after her. She is on her own ... vulnerable ... alone in the world to fight her own battles. Someone has wronged this widow. An injustice has been committed. What can she do? She goes before a judge. In Jesus' day, widows had no legal rights, as well as little protection under the law. Even worse ... consider the judge assigned to her case.

Jesus says this man is the sort of judge who *neither feared God nor had respect for people*. In other words, he is arrogant and indifferent. However, despite a seemingly hopeless situation, the woman persists in pleading her case before this hardhearted judge. Jesus says, even though this judge could care less about what is right or about fulfilling the demands of the law ... even though he has no compassion in him ... he finally relents and gives the poor widow what she demands ... what she deserves. The determination of the woman is, according to Jesus, how you and I are to pray.

The widow in this parable is a symbol of all who were poor and defenseless. For us, she symbolizes the type of hopelessness we each feel when we sense we have no control over our life ... no control over the outcome of certain circumstances ... when we feel we are at the mercy of fate. It is obvious that the widow, without resources of any kind, had no hope of ever extracting justice from such a judge. However, she did have one faith characteristic: persistence. The judge may have boasted that he “neither feared God nor had respect for people”, however, it is possible that what the judge in the end feared was actual physical violence. The word translated, lest she *exhausts* me, can mean, lest she *gives me a black eye*. In any

event, at the end of the day, the widow's persistence achieved justice.

This parable is told in connection with a discussion Jesus has with his disciples about prayer. In a previous chapter, Jesus gives his disciples a model prayer ... what we call "The Lord's Prayer." In some ways, this parable is a kind of commentary on prayer, and yet, much more. Though the story is about how we ought to pray, it is also about "how not to lose heart." But given life's problems, isn't it unavoidable that we, at times, lose heart? Jesus teaches that there is something about God that enables you and me during many of life's troubles not to lose heart.

In other words, the gospel lesson is more about God than an admonition to us. We can pray, live, act, believe and "not lose heart" *because* of God ... who listens, cares, and acts. Jesus teaches us that there is power behind persistence and prevailing. God is not like this unjust judge. Jesus says: *If, in the end, an unjust judge can be wearied into giving a widow woman justice, how much more will God, who is a loving Father, give His children what they need?*

This is true, and yet, it is no reason why we should expect to have all our prayers answered. Parents refuse the requests of children, because it is their responsibility to discern what is good and right for their children ... what would help rather than hurt. Gods acts are ways similar to a Parent. We do not know what may happen in the next hour, week, month, or year ... only God sees time whole. Therefore, only God knows what is good for us in the long run. This is why Jesus says we must never be discouraged in prayer. This is why Jesus wondered if people's faith would stand the long delays as God works His will.

When the son of Rabbi Harold Kushner was struck by a tragic disease, he wrote a book about it, titled, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. The rabbi's point was that we cannot control the fact that bad things will happen in life. But when they do, we do have the ability to respond in different ways. How we respond helps determine how things play themselves out. A deep, underlying faith and commitment provides a foundation for playing the cards life deals us. And when we see the world as having shape and form, then life takes on direction, meaning, and substance. William Jennings Bryan wrote: *Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for; it is a thing to be achieved.*

Being people of a faith ... a faith grounded in the Scriptures, we have that tradition to help us understand the events of our lives ... a source to help us cope with the ambiguities of life with the dilemma of randomness. Luke makes clear for the "need to pray always and not lose heart." Persistence is an essential ingredient of prayer. Without persistence, prayer lacks staying power. One of life's real problems is learning when to hang on and when to let go. We need to learn to put a stop-loss order on some things ... for example ... worry ... worry is not worth our time or energy. Let it go! The things that we consider worth persisting in ... are a barometer of our values. We are to hold fast to the good. We are let go of the trivial and the unimportant. In the face of hopelessness, we are to pray hopefully. In the face of darkness, we are to "kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight" (Bruce Cockburn).

There is another point that strikes me about Jesus' parable ... the fact that the widow's story connects prayer with public action. Like William Wilberforce, the widow needed justice that private prayer alone would not deliver. You and I are not called to pray passively, hoping God will change the world on our behalf. "Prayer may be wind at our backs, but sometimes we need to track down the answer in person." As the African proverb says, "When you pray, move your feet."

William Wilberforce once wrote, "My walk is a public one," and the widow's action was public, too. Banging on the judge's door every day, she must have given rise to gossip among the neighbors as to why she returned so often. Eventually the judge was either embarrassed or annoyed by the action, and the widow got justice for her and her children. The widow's story seems to blur the distinction between petitioning in prayer and petitioning as public activism. Pray and keep on praying; ask and keep on asking; don't take no for an answer. And rattle plenty of cages until the answer comes.

In fact, prayer as Jesus taught it isn't just a private matter. It is not personal therapy or a crutch for the weak. Prayer is about refusing to believe that the way things are has to be the way they will always be ... about imagining how the world could be and gaining the wisdom and the energy to bring it about. For some, like Wilberforce, this applies to issues of international justice. For others, like the widow, it means chipping away at the dozens of petty injustices that diminish ordinary people's lives. Either way, prayer makes us refuse to accept a system that deals out injustice and gives us the determination to see it change ... because "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. (Martin Luther King, Jr.).

As people of faith, whatever our mountain, we must climb; whatever our path, we must journey; whatever the height or depth or width of all our problems, we must persist in praying to God to show us how we may overcome. We can not permit the difficult circumstances of our life to defeat us or cause us to resign. Therefore, my word to you this day is basic: Do not lose heart ... keep praying ... keeping moving your feet ... defeat that which would defeat you ... even if you have to "kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight" (Bruce Cockburn).