

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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## “Don’t Lose Heart, People!”

A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth

29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

October 20, 2019

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 119: 97-104; 1Timothy 4: 12-14; Luke 18: 1-8

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### Thought #1

It wasn’t so long ago, that as proud parents we attended

our son and daughter-in-law’s graduation from UNC medical school,

and heard them recite the Hippocratic Oath in unison.

As you know, it’s an oath outlining a core of ethical principles for doctors,

attributed to the Greek physician, Hippocrates,

who pre-dated Jesus by 400-500 years.

Here are some of the principles from that oath:

*I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science,*

*and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding*

*may outweigh the surgeon’s knife or the chemist’s drug.*

*I will not be ashamed to say, “I know not” nor will I fail to call in my colleagues*

*when the skills of another are needed for my patient’s recovery.*

*I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed*

*to me that the world may know.*

*Most especially must I treat with care in matters of life and death.*

*If it is given to me to save a life, all thanks.*

*But it may also be within my power to take a life;*

*this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness*

*and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play at God....*

Across the centuries, Hippocrates words say to me,

treat your patients as fellow human beings;

care for the person, and not just the disease;

don't think with your head only, think also with your heart!

My epiphany that day in May was the words I leaned over and stage whispered

to my husband during that graduation ceremony:

"Pastors should be taking the Hippocratic Oath, too! Why don't we?"

Is it only physicians who have a special obligation to treat all human beings

with warmth, sympathy, and understanding?

Is it only physicians who are obligated to maintain confidentiality,

even after the death of a person?

Is it only physicians who are obliged to admit "Honestly, I don't know,"

and call for the help of colleagues when their knowledge is limited?

Is it only physicians who must exert extreme caution at playing God?

I know that justices and judges of the United States currently take an oath of office

before performing their duties, too, something along these lines:

"I do solemnly swear that I will administer justice without respect to persons

and do equally right to the poor and rich,  
and that I will faithfully and impartially discharge and perform  
all the duties incumbent upon me under the Constitution and the Laws  
of the United States, so help me God.”

I wonder if the judge in this Jesus-parable had to affirm any such oath?

## **Thought #2**

There are two unnamed characters in this Jesus- parable from Luke’s Gospel.

One has dominant power; one does not.

The one with power, the judge, has the power of office; the power of gender;  
the power to affect lives, one way or another;

the power to protect the fragile, like this widow,  
which Torah law commands, not only of judges,  
but of each faithful Jewish person.

However, this judge cares not one whit about God, about God’s people,  
or about God’s law, apparently.

Maybe his attitude gives him the necessary detachment and impartiality

to meet and administer justice more objectively, which would be commendable.

Or, on the other hand, maybe he is overwhelmed by the volume of his caseload.

Perhaps he is burned out, and has lost the ability

to identify with victims, to sense life from their perspective,  
to feel their pain and their helplessness.

Like the rich man in the parable of *The Rich Man and Lazarus*,

this person of power has lost the ability “to see” this widow’s plight.

In other words, he has lost heart, or the ability to think with his heart!

How un-Hippocratic of him! But hey, he didn't have to take that oath either!

I, too, have been that way, as a pastor. I can understand his numbness and disregard.

Sometimes, so many waves of distressed people lap at your feet

that you lose the ability to feel and absorb their pain.

Your emotional mop is soaking wet, and needs a good wringing

in order to be able to absorb more, but you lack the time to do that,

so you become like this judge.

You do your job. You deliver the purest of justice, perhaps.

But you lose heart for the very people whom you took an oath to serve,

and thus become an oaf of office. Believe me, I get it!

The other character in this parable, the widow, is less powerful.

Widows in her day could be rich or poor, but their status often was tentative,

because their husbands, the major source of their protection

and identity, were dead.

While other male relatives, or family wealth could provide

some measure of security, widows were virtually invisible.

In terms of social power, she is the fragile one, having no one to fight for her.

If she were to dial 911 to say that she was drowning, the dispatcher might mock her.

If she were to file a complaint of sexual harassment, she might face public humiliation.

She is on her own, with no advocate to speak on her behalf.

In appealing to this judge for help, she must *herself* be persistent and relentless,

bothersome and badgering, hoping that he eventually  
will "see" her as a fellow human being.

Perhaps in her harangue she blasts the judge with Torah law, pummeling him with  
one of many verses, like Deuteronomy 27:19, which says,  
"Cursed is the one who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow."  
Perhaps she scorches him, like little Greta Thunberg before the UN,  
reminding him that people like him in positions of power should know better.

Shame on you! How dare you!

Perhaps she just outlasts him in the haggling, until he throws in the wig.  
You have to admit, she has heart, if heart in this instance is defined as courage.  
She never loses heart in the validity and veracity of her plea for vindication.

And wonder of wonders, it works. Because she keeps badgering him;  
because she comes at him like she "might give him a black eye,"  
the Greek says in verse 5;  
because she persists and persists; he takes notice, sees her, and relents.

There is a thread of connection here between the blindness of justice,  
a judge who doesn't see, and the threat of a black eye, if we look carefully.

"Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone," the judge admits,  
"yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see to her vindication,  
so that she may not blacken my eye, by continually coming." (verses 4-5)

It's not really justice that is served, you will notice; it is only self-defense

that serves the more powerful. Yet the widow gets what she wants, too.

So, who can say which party prevails in court? Both, perhaps?

But do you know what bothers me most about this parable?

It bothers me that this woman should have to face the judge alone!

No one in a powerless position should have to do that;

no one should have to walk that lonesome valley by themselves.

Someone should have the heart to stand with her, lest she lose heart, lest she lose life.

My friend, Jerry Perry, who works for TROSA, says that he, and usually one or two

others from the TROSA staff, always go with their clients when they face court time, to witness to their on-going transformation.

### **Thought #3**

Some of you might remember JaQuan McGhee, the college freshman who came

and spoke to our Faith and Community class this summer

about his experience of coming out of a blighted neighborhood in southeast DC.

This he accomplished with the help of his high school teacher, Isabelle Potts,

and her mother, Kelli Hunnicutt, by learning to read, working hard in class,

excelling in several sports, by graduating from high school,

and recently by matriculating at Louisburg College.

JaQuan's story has been captured in a moving documentary called *Leaving Anacostia*,

which is a beautiful testimony to his talent, persistence and perseverance,

and to the power of teachers and friends who believed in him and stood by him;

who risked being in a relationship that encourages and empowers the powerless;

who thought with their heads *and with their hearts*.

JaQuan easily could have lost heart when he was picked up for a robbery charge, and locked up for part of his sophomore year in high school.

"I had to stay prayed up," Jaquan's mother LaShawn Weathers said of his experience.

"I didn't think he would make it."

But JaQuan pushed through that justice involvement with the power of a seven-sport athlete, and with the perseverance of a worrisome widow.

But here's the rest of the story that JaQuan did not tell us that Sunday.

In 2017, McGhee was picked up on a misdemeanor assault and weapons charge, which landed him back before a not-so-compassionate judge, who found him guilty in the summer of 2018.

All of his hard work would have been for naught, if that judge had sentenced him to return to prison, which that judge was inclined and ready to do, despite JaQuan's insistence, and his family's insistence that he truly had changed.

But his teacher friend, Isabelle, and her mother, Kelli, drove to DC, and went to court to testify as character witnesses for JaQuan.

It took the testimony of two white women, unfortunately, to sway this judge.

It took the testimony of two white women to weigh the scales of justice towards compassion in favor of one young black man.

As a result, this judge yielded, giving JaQuan one year's probation instead, thus allowing him to continue with his education.

(Korff, Jay, ABC7. *DC Teen With Troubled Past Tries to Beat the Odds with Help of Remarkable Young Teacher*, December 14, 2018)

Luke says that Jesus' parable is teaching disciples about our need to pray,  
and not lose heart; not lose our warmth, sympathy, and understanding;  
not lose our sense of oneness with all of humanity.

Personally, I think that Jesus is foreshadowing his own adjudication here,  
when he will stand alone before the High Priests of the Sanhedrin;  
alone before the highest officials of the Roman government, Pilate and Herod;  
like this widow before the judge, alone and powerless in the face of power.  
Perhaps Jesus believes that no one else should ever have to be put in that position;  
that discipleship is about praying certainly,  
but praying not just with one's lips, but with an embodied, incarnated prayer  
that places one, physically, in proximity and in solidarity with others  
who are less powerful, like widows, like children, like JaQuan,  
like immigrants, like perfect strangers, like addicts, like the justice-involved,  
like the mentally challenged, like the least of these.

Robert F. Kennedy once said, "Each time someone stands up for an ideal,  
or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice,  
they send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other  
from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples  
to build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of  
oppression and resistance."

(Kasich, John. *It's Up to Us*, Preface quoting Robert F. Kennedy)

For you see, God has made an oath on our behalf, too, called a covenant.



And God has promised in this oath to be our God; and we, God's people.  
And God has inscribed, written this new covenant upon our hearts and sealed it  
with the body of Jesus, broken for us, and the blood of Jesus,  
poured out for us, to remind us that we never stand alone,  
nor should anyone else.

God is with us always, even to the end of the age, in Jesus, Emanuel;  
and God is for us always, in Jesus, the Christ, so that we might be for others;  
and God is in us always, inscribed indelibly upon our hearts,  
heart of our own heart whatever befall.

So, don't lose heart, people! Don't lose heart! Amen.

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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