

DON'T LOSE HEART
Sermon for Pentecost 22C—Lk 18:1-8
LPC, 10/20/13

Yesterday I read an article in the *New Yorker Magazine* about Elizabeth Smart, the young woman who was abducted at knifepoint as a teenager and forced to serve as a sort of sexual slave for several months. She is now a married adult, and spends part of her time on the lecture circuit, motivating young people to stand up for themselves and instructing the public on the warning signs of child abuse in their communities. She has turned her ordeal into a service opportunity to the world. The interviewer was astounded by how sensible and grounded she has turned out to be.

There are other examples of people who endured great hardship and survived to dedicate their lives to the public good. Senator John McCain was a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Nelson Mandela spent decades as a political prisoner in South Africa. How they bore up under such hardship and discouragement can hardly be imagined. But I know that all three of these people were persons of faith.

The disappointments and discouragement I have experienced do not compare with what others have survived. But I can tell you that God has always comforted me in disappointment and discouragement and given me the gift of faith when I most needed it.

And so, I tell you, in the face of disappointment and discouragement, pray always and don't lose heart. Which of course is exactly what Jesus says in today's Gospel lesson from Luke.

Consider the context in which Luke was writing. Luke wrote for a generation or two or even three removed from Jesus' generation. What had happened to the Christian community during that interval is significant.

Jesus' earliest followers had heard Jesus say that he would come again. They believed him. They believed Jesus would come again in their lifetime. They believed the cosmic order would finally be resolved for good in their lifetimes. Changing their whole lives for Jesus was not such a sacrifice since they believed it was a short-term condition before paradise was established.

But time passed. And then more time. Jesus' contemporaries died out and Jesus hadn't returned. This actually was one of the reasons the Gospels got written. The Gospel-writers' motivation was exactly the same as those who today are collecting the memoirs of WWII veterans before they all die off and their first-hand accounts are lost for all time. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were concerned to write down the story of Jesus before the keepers of the oral accounts died off.

Imagine growing up in a community that believes Jesus could return any day. Imagine this is what you have taught your children and your children's children. Now, imagine you have grown old and the community gets impatient, and then blasé. People

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have tried to live according to Jesus' teaching, which as we all know is counter-cultural and hard. They have comforted themselves by saying, surely, it won't be that much longer. But the old ones are dying and the culture has become really quite antagonistic. Disappointment sets in, and then discouragement.

In this context, Luke takes care to report Jesus' teaching on the importance of continual prayer. Luke builds up and encourages the weary followers of Jesus. Do not lose heart. Jesus will surely come. If even a hard-hearted judge relents under persistent pressure from a wronged widow, surely a loving and benevolent God will answer our prayers for deliverance.

At two thousand years' remove, most of us no longer expect Jesus' immanent reappearance. Our culture is more accepting of people who call themselves Christian, though truly following Jesus is just as counter-cultural and hard as ever. Cultural values are not Christian values. Despite what some people claim, they never were. Human society has never significantly supported love of enemies, forgiving multiple times and sharing wealth with the poor in any transformative way.

We may not be as discouraged at the apparent tardiness of Jesus' second coming as those early Christians who expected it immanently. But we know what discouragement feels like. We know what spiritual impasse feels like. We know what it is like to try to hold to Christ-like values to love, forgive and share. There are times when the world at every turn seems to oppose us and our feeble efforts at goodness.

In the world around us we see genocide. We see politicians putting self-interest ahead of the public good. Even something on a homelier scale, like news of the abuse of a small animal, can break our hearts. Plus, we are all too aware of our own failings: when we fall short of loving, forgiving and sharing. We grow disheartened and doubt that God's kingdom will ever come.

Jesus' response is the same: Always pray. Do not lose heart. Jesus will surely come. Indeed, Jesus is by our side in our defeats... our own crucifixions. If even a hard-hearted judge relents under persistent pressure, surely our loving and benevolent God will comfort us in our need.

Always pray. Do not lose heart. Jesus will surely come.