

“Brave Heart”

Luke 18:1-8

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I borrowed the title of the sermon today from the 1995 movie Mel Gibson directed and starred in, *Braveheart*. This movie tells the story of Scotland’s fight for independence from England in the 13th and 14th centuries.

One of the most riveting scenes in the movie occurred when William Wallace, the leader of the Freedom Fighters, refused to ask for mercy while being tortured and just before he was beheaded. Instead, he mustered the last ounce of strength he had and shouted, “Freedom!” This was Wallace’s final attempt to encourage his followers to fight on.

It worked. Nine years later, Wallace’s followers prevailed, and Scotland won its independence. Because he never lost heart, in spite of all the challenges, obstacles and adversities he faced, they did not, and Scotland became a free country.

It appears that Jesus’ disciples were losing heart, and he sensed it. They needed to be encouraged to remain faithful in the midst of all the challenges they were facing, so Jesus told this parable, which Luke passed on to his readers.

It is a rather humorous and light-hearted parable, in spite of the seriousness of the situation. It is only found in Luke, which doesn’t surprise me. The importance of prayer is a prominent theme in the parable, as it is throughout the entire gospel. Eight times in Luke, Jesus withdraws to pray and on seven occasions, Jesus taught on prayer.

In this particular parable, a defenseless widow appealed to a heartless and indifferent judge for justice. His lack of response probably did not surprise her, but neither did it discourage or deter her. She continued to “bother” him, as the judge finally admitted, until he decided to give her what she wanted. Actually, the judge said that he was afraid she would attack him, giving him a black-eye if he did not favorably respond to her.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? What was his point?

I believe one reason he told it was because he understood firsthand the plight of widows. In all likelihood, Joseph died while Jesus and his siblings were young, leaving Mary with a lot of responsibility. The last mention of Joseph in scripture occurs when Jesus was twelve.

Perhaps this parable was meant to encourage those who wielded power to respond to cries for help with justice and compassion. Jesus knew how important this was to God, and he knew the difference it could make in a widow's life.

According to Luke, there was another reason Jesus told the parable. "Then Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart" (18:1)

"Not lose heart..." This story was meant to encourage his disciples to remain faithful in the midst of stiff challenges. Don't give up, even against great odds; don't let go of a dream, at least not without a fight.

Is this a message you need to hear? Evidently, Luke felt like his readers needed to hear it. The first generation of Jesus followers were struggling with their own set of problems in a world that was hostile to their message and them. They were ridiculed, discriminated against, scourged, imprisoned, and some were even persecuted. What were they to do?

Was it time to give up and walk away from their commitment to follow Jesus? According to Luke it was not. It was time to pray and persevere, not cave in to despair. Luke knew that implicit in discipleship was the expectation of a life-long commitment. Disciples must finish what they start, just as Jesus did.

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith?" I'm sure this question put the decision Luke's readers needed to make in perspective.

If they did not remain faithful, who would? If they gave up, who else would? If they quit, what would be their purpose for living? Their decision had broad ramifications.

What are you about to give up on? Is it a dream that you have nurtured and nourished for years? Is it your fight to overcome an addiction, or the hope that someone you love will do so? Are you about to give up on finding a job or believing that your finances will improve? Are you about to decide that your marriage is not going to get better, or you will never find a mate?

Why haven't you already given up? What keeps you going? Is it that you don't want to be labeled a quitter or disappoint others? Do you have too much invested to walk away and cannot bring it upon yourself to take a shovel to the cemetery of broken dreams and start digging?

In Dr. Peter Rhea Jones' commentary on the parables, he tells the story of friends who were debating whether it is more challenging to begin a journey or to complete it. One felt the initial steps were the hardest while another believed the final stage of a journey is the most trying because you are exhausted.

Someone suggested the middle of a long journey may be the hardest. You can no longer hear the cheers of those who saw you off and sent you on your journey or the twinkling lights of the upcoming city.

"This can be true in the middle part of life, in the middle of a marriage, in the middle of an addict's battle for recovery or the halfway point in grief," writes Jones.

Are you in the middle of a journey at this time? Are you losing heart? Are despair, hopelessness and depression creeping in?

What do you need to stay on course and remain faithful? I'm sure there are many things, but none more important than praying. At least this is what Jesus told his disciples.

I am confident you know the most frequently asked question about this parable. Is God like an insensitive and indifferent judge who must be threatened before he responds to our needs? Of course He is not.

I'm sure you can see that Jesus was not comparing God to this judge, but drawing a contrast to him. If an unjust judge is willing to grant a widow's request merely because she is a pest, how much more is a loving and responsible God willing to respond to his children's needs?

When you pray, Jesus reminded his disciples, you are not praying to a God who begrudgingly listens or reluctantly responds to your needs, but a concerned parent who eagerly waits to hear from you. So, pray at all times.

Evidently, Jesus felt that God had something to offer to those who had grown weary. He believed God had a special place in his heart for those who were struggling, like this widow, and was confident God would respond to pleas for help with compassion and justice. So, he encouraged his disciples "to pray always and not lose heart."

As clearly as this parable talks about the necessity to pray, I believe it also speaks to us about what to pray. Based upon the actions of this widow, it seems to me Jesus was not instructing his disciples to pray God would rescue them from a bad situation, but empower them to take control of it.

When the widow could find no advocate, she went directly to the judge and pleaded her case. This took a lot of confidence and courage in a culture which discouraged women from being this assertive.

When the judge gave her a cold shoulder, probably because she offered no bribe, she did not give up. She badgered him until he ruled in her favor.

Was this Jesus' way of telling his disciples they needed to pray God would empower them rather than rescue them? I think so.

A few years ago, I was taught the difference between counseling and coaching. Many people have "life coaches" these days to help them maximize their potential.

In counseling, it is permissible to offer suggestions and advice. In coaching, you never do this. Instead, a "life coach" helps clients understand everything they need to maximize their potential lies inside them, and it is the coach's duty to pull it out of them. This includes not only the solutions to their problems or challenges, but the confidence and courage they need to take risks.

I am not a certified life coach, but for years I have told people they have what it takes to tackle and overcome any challenge they are facing, especially when they look to God for help. I truly believe through prayer, God will empower each of us to think outside the box and get out of our comfort zone, just like the widow in this parable.

Could this parable be speaking to you this way today? Is God eager and ready to help you take control of your situation by giving you wisdom, courage and confidence?

Maybe you need to change the way you are praying. Instead of asking God to rescue you, ask God...

...to empower you;

...to cleanse your heart and strengthen your resolve to do good;

...for humility and courage to deal with the consequences of faulty decisions;

...for wisdom to make better choices;

...to help you take risks and chart a new course.

I am confident God will answer your prayers and give you a "Braveheart."