

Oct 16th 2022

Jeremiah 31:27-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸ And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. ²⁹ In those days they shall no longer say:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

³⁰ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of the one who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus^[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my accuser.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’”^[b] ⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Sermon at United Church of Dorset, Oct 16, 2022

“The Persistence of Prayer”

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Luke 18:1-8

Looking back on what was known as Bloody Sunday in March of 1965 on the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, John Lewis said, “We were beaten. Tear gassed. Bullwhipped.

On this bridge some of us gave a little blood to help redeem the soul of America.” What led up to this? I recommend Jon Meacham’s outstanding and inspiring book, **His Truth is Marching On, John Lewis and the Power of Hope.**

Why was John Lewis there on the bridge in Selma along with so many others on that day in 1965? John Lewis was born in 1940 in Alabama, the youngest of ten children in a share-cropper’s family. It was a harrowing era to be black.

Omitting to say “Mister” to a policeman got a 26 yr. old African American church-going man, Jesse Thornton, lynched and dumped in a nearby swamp.

John loved the singing and the sermons in his local church. He seems to have always seen himself as a preacher. John’s chief chore on the farm growing up was the care of the family’s poultry. He recalled “We had a lot of chickens and I literally started preaching to the chickens.” He had some pastoral mishaps. When he was about 5 or 6 yrs. old, he wanted to save the soul of a chicken and accidentally drowned it during an attempted baptism. But there was resurrection, for the now saved chicken managed to revive in the sun. “The little thing stirred, he recalled, then stood up and waddled back to the coop.” When

one of his feathered charges did die, Lewis would conduct a full funeral, complete with readings from scripture and a eulogy. John learned the art of *agape*; of self-giving love, among those chickens – and he learned that the more difficult the task, the better he liked it.

He later heard Martin Luther King, Jr. preaching on the radio. And he followed the news from Montgomery. The Montgomery bus boycott changed his life more than any other event. To Lewis, the boycott was faith in action, the gospel moving from the pulpit to the streets, from theory to reality, from word to deed.

I have shared something of the beginning of John Lewis' life as an example of the grounding of a person who became a relentless crusader for justice and hope. He is for me a modern example of someone who is rooted in Jesus' message; who does not give up praying and working for justice.

The widow in Jesus' parable is tenacious in seeking justice for herself. She is actually annoying in her badgering the judge to hear her case. In Jewish and Christian Scriptures widows needed protection in an economic system that did not provide support outside the extended family structures.

The judge is pointedly described as "unjust" because he neither feared God, nor had respect for people. But the judge finally does agree to hear her case so that "she will not wear me out by continually coming." Another translation puts it strongly, and is quite literal, "so that she will not come and slap me in the face." In Jesus' parable this widow could stand her ground.

Luke's parable of the widow who continually came to the judge seeking justice encourages us not to lose heart. We are to pray and to be persistent in the life of faith on behalf of the justice

God intends. God is pictured in contrast to this unjust judge who does not care a bit about justice but does care about his own peace of mind! God, of course, has no peace of mind without justice.

If an unjust judge can grant justice in response to the widows constant badgering, how much more will God grant justice to those who cry out to him.

When Jesus in Luke talks about perseverance and courage, he is not talking about an abstract idea, but rather what is really inside us for the long run. The widow is a sign of prayerful faithfulness. We can work on this alone, but how much encouragement there is when we pray together, and when it is God's spirit that is prompting us to pray.

There are many reasons for our prayer to be perfunctory or superficial, or perhaps not exist at all. Often at the core, it is that our faith that has lost its trust. The widow kept coming to the judge hoping against all odds, persistent, determined, and relentless. We as believers are called to do this, too, because the Spirit has given us the courage to do so, **to pray without ceasing in a broken and fearful world.** Besides the need to pray always, the widow in Jesus' parable shows the Spirit's incessant work of encouraging us to pray. God's Spirit brings a nagging persistence and unrelenting perseverance.

Of course, we can grow impatient, losing heart and hope, and may be tempted to give up. As the Silent Meditation in our worship bulletin quotes Fred Craddock: "All we know in the life of prayer is asking, seeking, knocking, & waiting, trust sometimes fainting, sometimes growing angry."

Sometimes prayer is simply doing, and perhaps it is actually God doing to us and through us, beyond even our imagining. I see this as part of the adventure of prayer. But “adventure” does not deny also times of simply slogging along.

Praying is not only telling God about what we wish or hope will happen; our wish list. But the life of faith is about **“constantly lifting up every joy and concern, every fear and doubt, every lament and (yes) every plea to the One who hears and answers. The answers may not come when we think they should. The answers come in God’s time. As the God of Isaiah reminds us “My thoughts are not like your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.” It is hard, however, “to take the long view when we are praying our hearts out, bruising our hands with our continual pounding on heaven’s door.”** *Prof. Kimberly Long*

Jesus says to us, “God will not delay. God will help. God will grant justice.” We must understand that our prayers do not mount up to so many unanswered pleas; rather **they are our participation in the just reign of God. By praying continually, and not giving up hope, we live in the certainty that God has not abandoned this world. Living in hope, we work, in whatever ways we can, for the justice and peace that is coming for the earth, for all.**

The pastoral ministry of a church must give hope to the suffering. Teaching and preaching about ^{what we eat} eschatological hope is important! This is hope within time and beyond time, both now and at the end of our knowing. When we continually and actively pray in this way, then, when tragedies befall us, we already have in place a strong confidence in the unfailing providence of God. It is far more difficult to share this sense of God’s

faithfulness only when people are face to face with challenges or crises. **“When however, there is an active faith at work, faith that is lived as we strive toward the full reign of God, then hope remains alive, and we can sing of our trust in God, even if our voices falter.”**

Kimberly Bracken Long, prof. of worship, Columbia Theol. Seminary, Decatur, GA. *Ibid.*

(Pause)

Later, as a student at American Baptist Seminary in Nashville, TN, the universe of philosophy and religion was opened to John Lewis, and he took to it like a fish to water. Lewis learned a combination of the Sermon on the Mount and the nonviolent example of Gandhi. In workshops, the students were trained in protecting their bodies from blows, and also to pray for those who hated them.

Grounded in the south as an Alabama sharecropper's son, John Lewis was committed to justice for his people and for all people. The young John Lewis was a crusader for justice with other civil rights leaders. Active in the integrated interstate bus rides into the south known as the Freedom Rides, John Lewis spoke movingly in front of the Lincoln Memorial at the March on Washington in 1963.

Following efforts to register black voters in the face of much hatred and hostility, a nonviolent voter-rights march was planned from Selma to Montgomery. John Lewis and Hosea Williams led the column as they walked silently from the AME Church in Selma to the Pettus Bridge. *This is an unlawful assembly, Major John Cloud announced as the marchers reached the bottom of the bridge. Your march is not conducive to the public safety. You are ordered to disperse and go back to your church or to your homes.*

We should kneel and pray, Lewis said. There was not time. The troopers had put on their gas masks. Then the major shouted, *Troopers, advance!* Within seconds the wave of blue struck. Lewis was the first one to be hit. The billy club blow to John's head made a sickening harsh *thwack*. At the moment when I was hit on the bridge and began to fall, Lewis recalled, I really thought it was my last protest.

Bloody Sunday as it was known with its violence to non-resisting marchers was seen on TV screens across America and the suffering and blood shed helped pave the way for the final passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

United States Representative John R. Lewis was still pounding on heaven's door for voting rights and the cause of justice when he died in 2020.

In an essay published the day of his funeral ^{Lewis} ~~he~~ wrote in part: "Though I may not be with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. (Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.)"

Both Faith and Action are part of our call to pray, and to work for justice in our society. Let us persist with courage in doing so.
Amen.

Prayer of Pastoral Care October 16, 2022 Dorset

Psalm 121 proclaims, “The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. Today’s prayer response is: God of compassion, **hear our prayer.**

God of justice and mercy, we thank you for establishing justice and for dealing with us not according to our faithfulness, but according to your mercy. Put your persistent Spirit within us so that we may work tirelessly, and cry out day and night, until your will is done in all the earth. Keep us moving in concert with your Spirit. Give us wisdom not to be satisfied with easy answers that do not follow your way.

God of compassion, **hear our prayer.**

We bring to you the concerns and cares of the world around us. Especially we pray for those who long for justice and freedom, for safety and sustenance. We pray for those who work to overturn laws that oppress, and those who work to restrain military might that threatens human dignity. Our prayers are for all flash points of conflict in our world, for the people of Ukraine, and in other places of open fighting. We pray fervently for an end to war and violence among us. We pray for all who are in harm’s way today, whether the threat is from natural disaster or a disaster of our own contriving. God of compassion, **hear our prayer.**

We bring to you the cares and joys of our lives. We rejoice with those among us who celebrate a time of newness and renewal: for a new addition to the family; for meaningful work to do and good colleagues, for new members and visitors among us who bring energy and ideas and faith stories. We pray, too, for those in the

midst of struggle and pain: for those who are contending with illness; and anyone in need of the comfort and peace that only you, O Lord, can give.

God of compassion, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for an end to hunger and for an increase in generosity as we share the world's resources. And we pray for those who are living with the anxiety of loss – of loved ones, of memory, of stability of home or friendship. Heal us of our diseases; strengthen us in our frailties; and empower us for change within and without. God of compassion, **hear our prayer.**]

We bring before you those on this church's immediate needs list. ...

O God of justice and compassion, we do not cry out in desperation but in hope, for you are just in all your ways and you hear us when we call upon you. We pray that in us you may indeed find faith, the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ, living in us. Amen.

Hymn # 540 Love That will Not Let Me Go

OFFERING

Equipped for every good work, let us present ourselves and our offerings before God.

*DOXOLOGY and *DEDICATION

O God of generous providing, use these offerings, we pray, in service of the justice you are establishing through your kingdom in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Hymn # 517 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Charge — + Benediction

CHARGE

October 16, 2022 Dorset

You belong to God; therefore, I urge you:
stand firm in the faith, pray persistently,
and work tirelessly for justice,
for the days are surely coming
when God's kingdom will be all in all.

BLESSING

May the love of God dwell in your heart,
may the grace of Christ uphold you in faith;
may the Holy Spirit equip you for ministry;
until Christ's kingdom,
already in view,
comes in fullness among us, Amen.