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“The Cross is the Bedrock of Faith”

Text: Luke 18:1-8 (Genesis 32:22-30; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5)

(This sermon inspired by and for some of the thoughts and phrases indebted to the Rev. Dr. Norman Nagel and his sermon on this Gospel in Sermons of Norman Nagel, pp. 238-241.)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

And Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

It's easy to lose heart, isn't it? Jesus knows that. He is a man in every way like us except without sin. He knows what it's like when bad news comes, when our foundations are shaken, when the future looks bleak and uncertain. At such times it's easy to lose heart - to lose confidence, to lose courage, to resign yourself to the thought that this is just the way things are and they aren't going to get any better. And it can happen even toward God, can't it? We worry, we doubt, we wonder what God is doing . . .

Not always, of course. There are good times in our lives as well. Days when the sun is shining, friendships and health are good, there is laughter and good times.

But this parable of Jesus is not just for those times *when* we lose heart - it is so that we *may not* lose heart. It is so that in both good times and bad, we live by faith in a God who loves to give, to care, and have mercy. Even when that giving, care, and mercy are not evident or obvious. So that faith be the bedrock of our lives, and nothing else.

Like the widow in the parable. She is a nameless nobody, and what little she had seems to have been ripped off by her adversary. So she goes to the judge and issues her petition for judgment, for justice. And she won't give up. She does not despair, she does not lose heart, for faith is alive in her. She won't not be given to. She wrestles with the judge. She pounds on his door and his ears until she receives what she has come for. She will not let go. Faith does not let go.

That's the parable. But here's Jesus' question: ***when the Son of Man comes, will he find such faith on earth?***

Good question. Jesus is the Son of Man, and He is the one telling this parable, but Jesus is not referring to that current time - but to when He will come again, in the end, in the final judgment. This is what He will be looking for. Faith. Faith that looks to Him, relies on Him, and cries out to Him. Faith that clings to the Word and promises of God, not our

own opinions of who God is and what He ought to be doing.

So *if the Son of Man came today, would He find such faith on earth?* Well, yes and no we would say, I suppose. It's a mixed bag. There are plenty of folks, as Paul wrote to Timothy, who have *itching ears . . . who accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths*. But there are plenty of widows, too, I would say. Maybe you just cannot see them. Maybe they look like they have it all together. But maybe every night, that friend or neighbor or co-worker of yours is down on their knees, crying out to God like this widow.

But the question - *if the Son of Man came today, would He find such faith on earth?* - is better directed not at others, but at ourselves. *How is it with you?* Faith or unfaith? Gratitude or thanklessness? Joyous receiving or grudging discontent? Eager listening or insolent attitude? Humility or pride? What you think of God, what you believe about Him, is reflected in these things. The widow in the parable would not give up because she knew this worldly judge would do right. How much more the children of a heavenly Father who has promised good.

And not just promised, but *fulfilled* that promise.

The judge did not want to be bothered, did not want to be troubled. But the one who is our judge is so troubled for you that He goes to Calvary for you. And there He gives His judgment. Jesus is condemned and dies in your place, for your sin, for your unfaith, so that there be now no condemnation for you. Only forgiveness.

This is how God is toward us. Then and still today. And when the Son of Man comes, what we cannot see clearly now we will see clearly then. When we stand before God we will see how tenderly He has brought us through those dark times, when everything went wrong, and we and our lives seemed widowed and worthless. We will see how generously He has provided for us so that we did not even know the danger and need that surrounded us. We will see how our Father's delaying, His seeming not to care, was simply part of His wanting our good, readying us for larger gifts, the wholeness and fullness of good - His life and salvation.

So yes, God delays. He patiently and lovingly puts up with us, bears with us and our faltering and little faith that doubts and fears and seeks our life apart from Him. *Longsuffering* is the word the Scriptures often use. For your Father is no uncaring judge, but loves you more than you know, more than we should expect. And so He is nurturing you to the bigger and better things He wants to give you. Scouring out the sin and wrong expectations . . . like with Jacob. No small wrestling match was that, that went on all night, that left Jacob injured **and** blessed. So too God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is working for you.

So how do we pray in this way, like this widow? How do we pray and not lose heart? Well, I would say, you do already. You do when you pray as Jesus taught you to pray.

Our Father - my father who adopted me as His son, His daughter, in Holy Baptism, not because I deserved it but because I didn't, because He loves me . . .

hallowed be Thy Name - your name by which we cry out to you; your name by which we know you; your name by which we know that you are good and loving and merciful; your name that you have given to me and place upon me in baptism . . .

Thy kingdom come - your kingdom come to me; keep me in this kingdom, in the faith, in the church, in your love and care . . .

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven - on earth. Yes, here and now, your will be done, your will is done. Your mercy, your gifts, your salvation given. Do to me, work in me, according to your will . . .

Give us this day our daily bread - and help me be satisfied and thankful for what you give to me each day according to your will, be it what I had in mind or not, be it ease or trouble, sunshine or storm, and trust that it is good and for my good . . .

And forgive me - forgive me my unfaith, my pride, my attitude, my thanklessness, my doubting you and your love. And through your forgiveness, give me the faith to forgive others, for you are the judge, not me; you are the avenger of wrongs, not me; you died for those sins already . . .

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil - deliver me from the evil one who would plant all kinds of false and deceiving thoughts of you in my mind, and so cause me to follow my own path and desires. Let those seeds not take root in my heart and mind, but only the truth of your Word, the truth of your love.

And praying all that, the judgment for which we cry out, like this widow, then is given. We do not have to wait for the last day, the final judgment. Already Jesus comes to give His judgment on earth - for the judgment rendered at Calvary is given to you here - as His Word of forgiveness is spoken to you and His Body and Blood given to you. Words that give what they say. And you are mercied, you are forgiven, you are raised. For the Son of Man comes now, even as He promised. And faith receives the gifts that He comes and brings. The gifts He freely gives. The gifts He loves to give. The gifts He died to give.

If He delays, He wants you only to grow strong in this faith, in openness to His giving - in ways you might not expect! - and to the always more He wants to give. To make you whole and new and do, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, *more than you expect or imagine*

(Eph 3:20).

[So Jesus] told them [this] parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

Jesus is drawing very near to Jerusalem when He tells this parable; very close to the cross. And Jesus knew this would be a time when the disciples would lose heart. But, in fact, Jesus on the cross is not a time to despair, not a time to lose heart. **Jesus on the cross is the certainty of faith.** For we pray not to a God who is far away in power, who may or may not hear, and may or may not act - like a judge who doesn't want to be bothered - but to a God who hung on a cross for you, has promised to hear, and promised us every good. Which means that even His cross and your cross are good.

So cry out to the Lord, in good times and bad. Beat on His door and on His ears. He loves such prayers of His children. And He will come quickly.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.