

Luke 18: 1-8

PRAY WITHOUT LOSING HEART

2020 – *What a year*

2020 has been... something. I must confess that I've been lost at sea the last few months while we've been on lockdown for Covid-19. The reality is that like many other people, losing my familiar rhythms and interactions has brought about a deep sense of grief which is unlike anything I've ever experienced. Pauline Boss, an academic at the University of Minnesota coined the term 'ambiguous loss' – the idea that every loss doesn't hold a promise of resolution. We just don't know when this season of losses – be they losses of routine, the failure or disruption of long-gestating plans, or the deaths of loved ones – will come to an end. We try and make sense out of it all, but sometimes we simply can't. That just adds to the weight we must bear.

Just as in the US, we here in South Africa have also been experiencing deep challenges with racial reconciliation in this season, and that has merely compounded an already dire situation when we feel we don't have the innate emotional resources to keep going. When the obstacles are that large, that deep, that systemic, that depressing, it almost seems outrageous (or petty?) to stand in prayer. In our Scripture for today, Jesus is talking to his disciples about this in-between time we live in when we are waiting for his return to set the world to rights. His disciples will experience pain and must await vindication, but he urges them to always pray and not give up.

Embracing questions

Often, our lives are lived in the fog, in the moments between our losses and the Lord returning to make things right. We may be bewildered, hurt, confused, angry, shocked and questioning what is happening to us. We may be questioning where the Lord is, and why he seems not to show up when He's needed. I've been reading a book called '*The Gospel according to Moses*' by Athol Dickson. In it he writes about the lessons he learned from Chever Torah with Jewish friends (basically, Bible study). One lesson among the many he came away with is to embrace the willingness with which his friends asked God questions, even those questions that may not have easy answers. The back and forth banter as between friends which we see in Scripture between Moses and God, Abraham and God, and so on, challenged Athol and opened him up to the invitation extended to us to bring our questions, fears and hopes to Him. As Dickson writes, "God loves an honest question. And to me, Jesus is the creator of the universe on hands and knees, a proud Daddy talking baby talk to humanity, a God who has become man so that I can better understand his answers".

Sometimes, we fear to ask God questions because we fear we're being audacious, disrespectful, or doubting the Lord's goodness. In my culture, children or the young do not ask their elders questions. You simply do what you're told and hope to understand at some later stage when wisdom comes with grey hairs. Growing up that way, it has been a challenge for me learning to handle my kids who just LOVE to ask questions,

even at the most inconvenient times. Yes, sometimes it's a stalling tactic. But often it is genuine curiosity and a desire for understanding. I'm learning slowly to be honoured by questions and the trust it takes for my children to come to me with their questions.

As we wrestle with our questions, our doubts, our fears, our hopes and so much more, it's worthwhile remembering the fathomless love and wisdom of the God we worship. The same God who wept with the desire to embrace Jerusalem (Luke 13:34) so that they would have peace desires that we would bring all that we are, our cares and more, to him. I don't know what questions, what doubts, what fears, what anxieties, what dreams you carry with you in this moment. I don't know what this season of ambiguous loss has brought for you in its wake. The Lord does, and He invites us to cast our cares upon him because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

Pray, and don't lose heart!

Prayer is one of the main avenues through which we can address our questions to God. The Psalms, the song and prayer book of Israel, contain many prayers that I've found myself praying a lot lately. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever" "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?" To paraphrase Soong-Chan Rah in his book "*Prophetic lament: A call for justice in troubled times*" my 'theology and spiritual formation [hadn't] given me sufficient permission, language or tools to adequately sit with the despair and sadness of recent racial injustices, senseless acts of gun violence and social unrest taking place in the world around us', but the book of Psalms has continued to provide me with the ability and the language with which to lament before the Lord in prayer.

These questions that give voice to lament, along with affirmations of the Lord's goodness and presence, have been a source of solace. "The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1). Indeed. Our prayers can be as complicated as we are, containing our feelings of fear, sadness and loneliness, but they can also contain affirmations that remind us that the love of God toward us in Christ will always bind us to him and nothing in all creation can ever separate us (Romans 8).

In Luke's story, Jesus tells a parable to encourage his people to pray and "not lose heart". The Lord knew that situations would come up that would weigh upon us and potentially make us lose heart. Times of hardship can do that. Seemingly unanswered prayer can do that.

In this story, Jesus tells his disciples about a godless, contemptuous judge who should have been a champion for justice, but instead ignored the plight of the vulnerable. This is exactly the worst kind of person to have in authority when you need help like the widow did. In many places the Bible reminds us of the vulnerable social and economic position of widows – do you remember Naomi and Ruth, and how Boaz had to step in the gap to be their shield? So, when the widow went to this judge, she really had nowhere else to turn. Instead of getting help, the unjust judge spurned her. I wonder how she felt at that point? Where did she get the courage from, and why did she go back to that judge and face the possibility of further rejection? Sometimes, sheer desperation

can do that. If you have nowhere else to turn, you just have to keep going back to where you can get help and keep knocking on that door.

Sometimes it feels like our petitions aren't getting traction, our questions and cries go unanswered, and we don't know where else to turn. We are as helpless as the widow in Jesus' parable – we don't possess the power to change of our circumstances. Certainly, this season of Covid-19 has shown us how much of an illusion our sense of control really is. Jesus' encouragement to his disciples, and to us by extension, is that they are to persevere in prayer, even when it seems no one can hear us. Not only is the unjust judge in the story moved to action purely out of irritation and the desire to be relieved of the pesky, bold and persistent widow, but Jesus reminds us that God's people will receive justice, and He will not delay (Luke 18:7). Our boldness to keep approaching the throne of grace draws from what we know of the character of God, the just judge and our loving Father.

Though seemingly long in coming, God's justice will prevail. 'Justice' here speaks to things being put right, back to what they were supposed to be. Like a broken bone being set, or the scar on a tree being healed through patient care. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of his work for justice saying, 'Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice', and in God's time and working things will be as they were meant to be. From his life story, and from our own struggles with things that are 'not as they're meant to be', we can attest that the wait can be challenging, and we may not find the resolution we're looking for even in our lifetimes. That's challenging, right??!! It is, so much so that Jesus concludes the parable with a question in verse 8: "But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?"

Friends, we can pour out our hearts, with all their confusion, questions, anger, hopes, love, fears and anxieties before our Father in heaven. He invites us to do so because He's big enough to handle it. And unlike the unjust judge, we know that the God we pray to is a righteous and loving father. How much quicker and more compassionately will He respond to our plight?

Hudson Taylor once said, "It does not matter how great the pressure is. What really matters is where the pressure lies – whether it comes between you and God, or whether it presses you nearer His heart". I've found this season to be a mix of bewilderment and rich opportunities for activism, contemplation, repentance, lament and so much more. This is not the 2020 I wanted, nor do I want it even while I'm going through it! But the Lord in His grace is sustaining us even in this year of the locusts, and He calls us to keep coming to Him, to keep praying without losing heart.

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