

Luke 18:1-8
Will there be faith?
2016 - Year C
Roy W. Howard

[line about baseball teaching me hope in the face of defeat.]

Remember that old bumper sticker: "*If you aren't appalled you aren't paying attention*"? What exactly is appalling is not specified. I guess there is enough to go around for anyone who's paying attention. Seriously folks, these are dangerous times: reckless rhetoric and threats of violence that undermine the common good. What's sad is that this very old bumper sticker could have been written yesterday.

Now the bumper sticker across my heart reads, "If you aren't sad, you aren't paying attention." Discouragement is the feeling: 'here I am again fretting over the ways things are and how they most certainly will be in the future if things continue to go the way they been'. It's the sense that nothing seems to make a difference. Sadness sets its hooks in me when I take stock of the shape this world is in and no amount of political blather or religious clichés can convince me that anything will improve. One need not be a partisan to be discouraged with the social upheaval and deep divisions across every sector, including most sadly the Church.

At this juncture, with our eyes wide open to the way things are, we have two choices: to give up or go deeper, or as someone else said: go low or go high. Many people, perhaps most, have taken the first option and fallen into a moral stupor, looking for anything that distracts from what is really happening. I understand that option but there is also the option of going deeper. The gospel parable is actually for both people.

Among Luke's original community of hearers, faith was a tattered shawl and hope was wearing thin. They had prayed for years as the Lord instructed, "Thy kingdom come, thy kingdom come, and again thy kingdom come." Still the reign of God remained illusive. Still they waited.

It is a risk to live by faith. People who live by faith in God are always vulnerable to the threat of losing faith, giving in. That threat goes more serious whenever troubles mount and contradictions seem everywhere more real than any promised new day dawning. On these days, when faith is teetering on the edge, if we pray at all, we pray, "how long, O Lord, how long?"

Of course, it's not all darkness and doom; at least not for many of us. Babies are being born. There is laughter in the park. Joy abounds for those who have eyes to see.

But we who pray: "Thy kingdom come", know that not all is well with God's people in the world. The contradictions to the reign of God persist: violence, deception, division, hunger and hatred.

How then do we live faithfully in the face of all these contradictions when the reign of God seems so far from us?

That was the question of the disciples, in danger of losing faith and ceasing to pray. Jesus told a parable to a people who sensed God's absence as much as they hoped for God's presence. We are that people.

In this parable there are only two characters: a poor widow and a tough judge. The widow, already in a powerless position because she has no husband is also the victim of some particular injustice. She could have simply accepted her circumstances and given up. What could she do anyway against a judge who could care less about her plight? But she refused to give in. You get the impression that this widow would continue crying out for as long as it took to get justice.

I went looking for someone persistent, really persistent. Remember Malala Yousafzai? She is the teenager known as the fierce advocate for girls education who took on the Taliban from her small town of Minora in the Swat Valley district of Pakistan. She simply and courageously refused to take no for answer when it came to the educational needs of girls. She began at 11 years old with a blog post and kept on speaking, even when told to shut up and go away. Even when the Taliban put a bullet in her head she survived and now keeps on speaking up for the girls all over the world. When she was 17 she received the Nobel Peace Prize. She is only 19, one gets the hopeful sense that one day her relentless cry for justice for girls will win the day; even if, we must be honest, she dies in the process. It's her tenacious courage that reminds us of the widow in Jesus' parable. She is still demanding girls get a proper education.

So, Jesus poses a question "if an unjust judge does this, will not God, who loves justice and mercy, bring justice on the last day?" He makes the assertion that God's justice has been settled. It may be 10 years, it may be 100 years, it may be in our lifetime or in our children's, children's lifetime, but the reign of God will come.

The pressing question is whether there will be people who will follow the example of the faithful – like Malala - who persist in praying for the reign of God to come on earth with visible deeds of mercy and goodness?

Prayer is about waiting through long days and nights in silence. Into that silence, we toss our deepest hopes before the Holy One. Answers never come quickly and if they do come, are often come in such unexpected forms that we may miss them altogether. Rare is of overnight express mail answer from God. No one can pray well who does not

press on through holy absence and holy presence. Faith itself is sustained by such courageous praying.

God will not forsake the beloved. This is our faith and our baptismal hope. That is the good news and without it the bad news seems unbearably bad.

Until then we live with a question: "When the day comes will he find faith on earth?"

Great Trinity of love: let it be so among your people.

Amen.