

JUSTICE AND JOY

Luke 18.1-8

October 16, 2016, Pledge Sunday

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Luke 18.1-8: *The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge*

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

Stewardship canticle refrain:

And God will delight when we are creators of justice and joy.

*Yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice ...
justice and joy.*

It's been a beautiful thing in these weeks to see those among us of different ages, different ethnicities, different nationalities, different gender expressions, different sexual orientations, different spiritual journeys all standing together at this table to remind us that for everyone born, there's a place at the table. It's all been truly beautiful.

And then we would sing this refrain together each week and we would get to those last lines about justice and joy and I would be a little taken aback.

Is it just me or does this seem like an odd pairing to you?

It's odd especially today given this story Jesus tells comparing the discipline of prayer with the long slog of stubbornly, relentlessly wearing down the forces of injustice. Even if it's effective, it doesn't sound like there is anything joyful about it.

And so every week as we have sung this hymn I have been left wondering what the connection is between justice and joy.

Perhaps it helps to know that this hymn was written by Shirley Erena Murray, a New Zealander, who sometimes wrote hymns to accompany her husband's sermons. And if Pastor Ned is correct that "no one goes home humming the sermon," guess who the real preacher in that family would be.

Shirley's husband, by the way, was a Presbyterian minister who, given the hymns Shirley has written, had a very strong commitment to justice and equality.

And she wrote this particular hymn as an expression of the 1948 United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." She says she used the Declaration's basic themes that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and that those rights include "the right to shelter, safety, food ... the right to a job, to freedom of speech and worship."

So that's the justice part.

But what about joy?

Maybe you noticed the words in that first verse about a "star overhead." She says that relates to Article 26 of the Declaration about the "aspiration for education."

But it's also a clue, I think. I'm guessing it's a reference to the story she knew so well of a child born in a shed to poor refugee parents and, according to Luke, an angel chorus that appears out of nowhere and rattles some poor shepherds out in the fields with a message: "Don't be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy that shall be to all people."

And that clue, got me thinking that it might lead to a larger picture of the good news in Luke itself.

For instance, to the old priest Zechariah in Luke 1, the angel promises that he and his wife Elizabeth will have a child in their old age who will turn people's hearts to justice. And the angel says: "You will have joy and gladness" [1.14]. Justice and joy.

And, to the young woman, Mary, the angel says that she will have a child and Mary sings: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit *rejoices* in God my savior ... God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things" [1.46-55]. Justice and joy.

And then the child becomes a young man, and he stands up in his hometown synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit is upon me to bring good news to the poor; release to the captives; recovery of sight to the blind; freedom to the oppressed and to announce that this is the year of jubilee – that joyous celebration that comes with

the cancelation of debt and an economy of justice for all. Justice and joy.

A “star overhead” is a signal, I think, that the good news we come to celebrate every Sunday is about justice *and* joy.

This is important, I think, because I have to say that a lot of the churches I’ve been in that have a finely-tuned sense of justice are sometimes not very joyful places. Don’t get me wrong. Their social justice message may be clear. Their social analysis may be correct. But their laser focus on all the wrongs of the world, just drains the joy out of life. I go away feeling guilty about ever being happy. They are like the widow in Jesus’ story who keeps hammering away at injustice until that unjust system finally gives in.

And it might, the story seems to say.

But the question is: “When the Human One comes, will there be *faith* on the earth?” Will the generations to come find something more than dismantled systems of injustice? Will there be any imagination of a table where everyone has a place or hope for a home where everyone belongs? Will there be something more than critiques of the system? Will there be joy?

I remembered something this week from a Joan Baez concert. She was telling the story of being in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 to march with Dr. King. She says that she went to church on Sunday morning and a young black preacher gave a sermon called “Singing at Midnight” and the theme was that “white folks will see us – they will see our joy – and what we are doing and they’ll come join us in this movement because they will realize that’s the only place on earth to be right now.”

And the next day the jails were filled with people joyously, defiantly singing old gospel songs.

They will join this movement for justice, the preacher said, because “they will see our joy.”

I wonder what people see when they join us on a Sunday morning. I hope they see more than 145 years of our persistent work for justice – work with the indigenous people who lived here before us; work to defend Chinese immigrants and Japanese-Americans during the internment; work against racial bigotry and for the rights of all people regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation; work to support women in ministry and the empowerment of people to follow their call to serve the world through the Companis program we celebrate next week; work advocating for those who are homeless and that eternal work we do and the persistent prayers we pray for peace.

I hope people see the movement for justice among us. But I think that young pastor is right. People are only likely to join that movement if what they also see is our joy.

Our beloved Rod Romney wrote once that:

True joy is contagious and infectious. If it is the real thing, it spills out to others. And thus the human race advances a step higher in its spiritual evolutionary process, just because a single believer agrees to share the joy.

I’m not suggesting, and I know Rod Romney isn’t, that we dismiss or try to ignore grief and agony and the incredible horrors that humans can do to one another.

But that young black preacher in Birmingham all those years ago and Rod Romney here in this place I think are right. If we are looking to advance the movement of justice – to move on in our spiritual evolutionary process – the way to get there is joy. “Weeping may last for a night,” the Psalmist says, “but joy comes in the morning.”

So what is our joy? What is it that we celebrate? What really makes our hearts sing?

One of the things we are celebrating today is giving. And I know that makes Dr. Hunter's heart sing.

I remember when my dad was a pastor and around offering time, he would quote that verse from II Corinthians: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." [9.7]

Dad would sometimes point out that the Greek word used here is the word from which we get "hilarious" – God loves hilarious givers. And even though it's clear that the ancient Greek understanding of that word is different from ours, Dad had made his point: It's joy that magnifies whatever gift we give. It's not reluctance or obligation or compulsion or even the justice of it. It's joy.

What we are really asking you to give this morning is joy because if people *see* our joy, they will know they are in the right place. Joy is contagious. It's infectious. If it's the real thing it spills over to others and advances the whole spiritual evolutionary process.

Many years ago, I had a young friend named Mark. Mark was funny and goofy and was one of the most joyful people I have ever known. He left his hometown in Burlington, Iowa to make a life in the big city of Chicago and I met him at a job I was doing for the Medical Library Association – not a particularly joyful place but Mark was always doing something to crack us up.

Mark was also the person who was always going off to some protest or march or was signing us up for a letter-writing campaign against some injustice.

He was joyful but injustice was not a joke to him.

When I left my job, I lost track of Mark. And then one day I got a call that Mark had died. He was one of the too many casualties of the AIDS crisis at the time.

I was invited to his funeral at a kind of stuffy old church that did memorials pretty much by the book.

But, at the end of the service, the minister got up and said that there was one thing that Mark wanted us all to do. He wanted us to sing together that great old gospel song, “His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.”

I was stunned. I didn’t think of Mark as a religious person but we started to sing, “Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come ...” And then I got it: “I sing because I’m happy; I sing because I’m free.” That was Mark.

All these years later I can still see him because, as that preacher says, they will see us – they will see our joy – and they will come join us in this movement for justice because they will realize that this is the only place on earth to be right now.

So, as the choir sings this morning and you come with your gifts and pledge forms and offerings, bring your joy.

And today, if you hear that voice – *as* you hear that voice singing for joy – do not harden our hearts.

NOTES

An article about Shirley Erena Murray and the hymn “A Place at the Table” can be found at www.umdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-a-place-at-the-table. The story by Joan Baez is told in a live concert on YouTube; see “Let Us Break Bread Together – Freedom.” Rod Romney, *Wilderness Spirituality* (Element Books, 1999), p.270.