

JUSTICE AND JOY
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Luke 18:1-8

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 the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of travelling to Chicago to begin my term as a member of the national board of More Light Presbyterians. As most of you know, MLP is the organization within the Presbyterian church whose work has been focused on full inclusion for LGBTQ people in the church and in society. The name comes from an ancient claim that there is *always* more light and more truth waiting to break forth from God's heart—which I take as both an encouragement, and a reminder that this work of "building a church (and a world) that reflects God's heart" (MLP's tagline) is an ongoing adventure.

And it does seem pretty clear these days that we never really do get to just check off the box and move on. There *is* always more to be done, more healing, more justice, more light to be discovered and carried into the darkness. So, whenever people ask—are we really going to talk about THAT again?—racial justice, equality for women, gay rights, environmental healing--the answer, it turns out, is almost always yes. Our *primary* work, as Jesus puts it in our story today, is *to pray always and not lose heart*—or we might say *to listen deeply and keep bearing the light*. Always.

This capacity for deep, prayerful listening is crucial in any effort to build a more whole, more compassionate world. As we've been re-discovering in our Sunday Seminar conversations around race this fall, listening to the experiences and stories of the other, especially those who have been hurt and oppressed, is a necessary step on the way to any kind justice. Listen to the widow's plea.

I also think deep listening is what helps us keep hope alive. As the poet Mary Oliver puts it: "Instructions for living a life. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it." How else will we even notice where "more light" breaking in? So, we also need to listen to our own stories, remember where we've been, look deeply at where we are, in order to discover where it is we are being called to next.

So, remembering that it has been an epic five years in the PCUSA, with some significant polity changes that have allowed way more light to shine in our churches, our lives, our world. (And MLP has been instrumental in all of them.) In 2011, the elimination of language that sought to prohibit LGB people from serving in ordained leadership; and

in 2014 (when SPC finally officially joined forces with MLP) the lifting of the ban on same sex marriage in the PCUSA. And believe me, these new freedoms in our tiny church family have echoed loudly throughout the Christian world, and beyond, and helped many people keep hope alive.

I could never have imagined any of this 20 years ago, when that ordination ban was first slipped into our constitution. I am a cradle Presbyterian, but my first response then was: if this is the way of the church, count me out. It was a huge, personal betrayal of both my gay and lesbian friends and family, and me: I felt abandoned by that open hearted, inclusive church that had raised me up. I wanted no part of this other thing. And then, some gentle (and not so gentle) voices, pleaded with me to consider that maybe just maybe, I could listen to that anger, and use my passion in a more fruitful way. I could choose to be a faithful ally instead of a cynical quitter. I stayed. I prayed. I listened to people who'd been wounded. Started conversations with people who wounded them. I read a little, and then a lot, and my whole life started to shift around, and not always in a good way; it was very disorienting. I began exploring spiritual direction—how do you listen to the lost and brokenhearted? Somehow I wound up in seminary. And I found my way here, and discovered a whole community full of people who shared that deep longing for justice, freedom, and joy. (Not that we all agreed, mind you, its just that we were all willing to listen, to each other and to the Spirit.) And, the next thing I know, I'm in Chicago, sitting at table—a really big, beautiful, inclusive table—with some of my heroes. I don't know much, but I can tell you this--the Holy Spirit has a wicked sense of humor. Pay attention to that.

And I can't help but wonder about all the heroes who are no longer here; what would they discern in where we are today? Like David Sindt, that courageous pastor who kind of started it all, when he stood on the floor of the Presbyterian General Assembly way back in 1974, holding a sign that said simply: "is anyone else out there gay?" It was way more than a question, it was a statement of presence, and it was a plea for justice. That plea would echo through the church for another 40 years, planting seeds all along the way, seeds that are now bearing magnificent fruit. Forty years from that sign to some of the most joyful wedding celebrations I ever hope to see, right here at SPC.

This journey of justice, of liberation continues to unfold. We are so blessed to be part of this movement from intolerance to tolerance, from tolerance to welcome, from welcome to affirmation, and from there, to full on celebration of God's wild and wonderful human diversity. It raises an interesting question to sit with—where am I, where are we on this continuum from tolerance to celebration--in all of our interactions with: racial justice; environmental justice; fully conscious, unqualified equality for women; and full embrace of LGBT, and yes QIA individuals.

Because here's the thing—I'm pretty sure that we are the only church anywhere around open to any of this—welcome and affirmation much less celebration. Our light matters. Its true, the PCUSA has eliminated the ban on ordination, and we have ordained officers freely—but what about our sister churches? And other denominations? What about all the gifted gay people in those places? And what about LGBT clergy? How open are our churches, how open are we to that possibility? And about the T thing, not to mention the QIA—seriously, we have not even begun to have that conversation, to engage the reality, the stories of transgender and gender nonconforming human beings. They are all around us, integral members of our human family, created in the image

and likeness of God. They have so much to teach us about the fullness of human being and they are people who face some of the worst oppression that our sorry world dishes up. Are we listening?

As our current racial struggles remind us, almost each and every day, we do need to change laws, and that is hard, but it's a whole lot harder to change minds and hearts; true justice requires all three, and an ongoing transformation of our institutions, our communities, our relationships and ourselves. The plea for justice is way more than our prayers to God, it is also God's prayer rising in us. Are we listening to the widow's plea?

I am so inspired by how actively and creatively MLP is seeking to listen to the pleas for justice happening now. There is this growing realization about just how uniquely positioned we all are—all of us connected to this movement—in the work of ongoing transformation and liberation. Our polity changes freed us *from* a ton of baggage, dreadful restrictions on grace. So removing them also frees us *for* a much deeper and fuller embrace of God's holy abundance, this affirmation that there is always more than enough—freedom, justice and joy--for all. More Light is embracing this *freedom for* and seeking to expand their work and witness: to continue working for full equality; to continue strengthening more light emerging in member churches; and to broaden the work for justice in whole new ways and directions.

Among many other things, this includes the launch of an exciting new education effort, announced just this week, called the "Teach-In and Conversation Series." It is an interactive, webinar based program that will begin with a 3 part series on Racial Justice, Power, and Privilege; the first session is on October 26 at 3:30 pm EST. It will be live streamed at locations across the country, including right here at SPC. Please come and be part of this exciting new effort.

We need more light and more truth in our world today, maybe more than ever before. There is so much darkness and distress -- loud cries of judgment and disrespect threaten to drown out all the pleas for justice and joy. They echo inside each and every one of us, that voice of fear, scarcity, and judgment clamoring for attention, right there alongside the still small voice of the Beloved calling us to life, wholeness, and celebration. Which voice will we hear? Jesus said: pray always and do not lose heart. May this be so.

Sermon Hymn: For Everyone Born #769

Affirmation: Be watchful for the hilarious, the heartwarming, the silly and the sublime. This way will not pass again, and so there is a duty to be mindful of that which delights and keeps joy at the center. Fr. Gregory Boyle