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## WILL HE FIND FAITH ON EARTH?

LUKE 18:1-8

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When the Son of Man comes, will he find Faith on earth? I ask because Faith is on the verge of needing a heart transplant. She's had a couple of heart attacks and almost died in church one Sunday morning after the choir sang an arrangement of the Rolling Stones' "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." Her heart is still pumping though, but the blood is not flowing like it used to for some reason. The doctors are saying that the pace of her heart is becoming too slow. Faith has been through so much in such a short period of time. She's had a couple of bypass surgeries but that doesn't seem to have been a huge help. Faith has lost some of the weight that she was carrying around, but Faith is still moving sluggishly. She's tried all kinds of heart medications but that hasn't been much better. Now, the doctors are talking about the possibility of a pacemaker, but she doesn't like that idea. Faith is beginning to lose heart and she's getting tired. If her heart's health isn't bad enough news, her insurance company is threatening not to cover her any longer. You can't blame her for being down. She's about to give up. And many times, she's by herself in the hospital because the family of faith rarely stops by anymore to encourage her.

Faith was the mother of the church. She fed so many in the church family, especially during those lunches in the church basement after the Sunday morning service. But there she is now, Faith, alone, *sola fide*, lying on the bed of despair, still trying some of those well-worn spiritual therapies like saying the Lord's Prayer over and over again, especially that line about "do not bring us to the time of trial" even though she feels like she's being put on trial. That prayer doesn't seem to work anymore. She's even gone back to her childhood days and tried "now I lay me down to sleep I pray oh Lord my soul to keep. If I should die . . ." But she can't get past that part—if I should die. She's having a hard time finishing any of her prayers these days. Faith barely prays anymore because she doesn't know how to pray anymore, and nothing seems to heal her heart. None of her prayers seem to be answered. You can proof-text all you want "ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." But Faith knows from experience that one can ask, search, and knock, and not receive, find, and have any doors opened.

The heart of Faith is failing so I'm wondering, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find Faith on earth?" Things are not looking good for Faith. When the family of faith does visit her, they sometimes read scripture to lift her mood. The other day, they chose to read Luke 17:22-Luke 18:1-5. Faith was having a pretty good day until her family started to read those verses. Words about judgment, suffering, rejection, corpses, death, and a widow who needs justice. Light subjects. This is not necessarily the best kind of theological bedside reading for pastoral care of those suffering from heartache and pain. You don't have to enroll in seminary to know this. For heaven's sake, what was her family thinking when they chose those passages? The context for this reading is even the death of Jesus for Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, the place of his death and where he leaves others confused and grieving. The family should have done their exegesis before they chose those texts. Faith didn't want to hear about death and Jesus leaving earth. She wanted to know that Jesus was on earth and could fix her broken heart. Were they trying to kill Faith and send her to an early grave? Were they really trying to make her feel better and soothe her heart with words like "The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it"? The lightning will flash and light up the sky from one side to the other. "But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation." The days of the Son of Man will be like the days of Noah and Lot [Those were the "happy days" alright.]. And then one woman will be taken, the other left and where should we find her? "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." Vultures having communion on corpses. I'm sure that encouraged Faith. That was really good news. What were they thinking? These words of scripture are not for the fainthearted, but they read them to Faith anyway, even though they know she has a hurting heart. Their presence, or at least those readings, didn't make her feel any better. It only made things worse.

Even the story about the widow, the outsider in society, the one who had all the odds against her, yet fought for justice and got the justice she sought, was not a comfort to Faith. It was a challenge to her. She couldn't handle it right now. Rather than being an encouragement to her, the widow was a discouragement. She felt like she failed and fumbled as a Christian. She didn't pray always. She wasn't like this persistent widow. She had lost the fight in her and was on the verge of losing her heart. She couldn't take any more uncertainty and anxiety in her life; her health condition was

enough. This eschatologically driven uncertainty in the setting of this passage was too much for her. Even the disciples don't really get it when Jesus talks to them and foretells his death and resurrection. "They understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said." His very own disciples. No wonder Jesus tells them to pray always and not lose heart or faint because he knew their trust in him would be tested in the uncertain times in which they lived. Pray always and don't lose heart? Jesus tells the disciples to pray always and not lose heart because they are losing heart and fainting into a deep spiritual sleep. These same disciples are the ones who are found by Jesus sleeping because of grief on the Mount of Olives. Pray always and not lose heart? Yeah right. Does Jesus really know what it's like to follow him? The disciples were on the verge of becoming fainthearted on the journey just like Faith. We can't blame them. We can't blame Faith for struggling with the weight of the world's circumstances and things unseen. About the only thing she sees clearly is unanswered prayers. What does the future hold for Faith?

If it was up to us, Faith might have been dead a long time ago. I know the doctors changed her diet but look at what we fed her to clog her arteries of belief. No wonder she has heart problems now. Some church camps fed her the misconception that if you name it, and claim it, you'll get it from God—this became the "word of Faith" for a while. She was naming and claiming but God seemed to be refusing to answer, at least on her timeline. God was like the unjust judge, and she was the widow who was wearing him out, literally hitting him under the eye, boxing God for a blessing. But I've never known God to lose a battle. She fought hard for health and wealth and prosperity but only realized more disparities between her and others who questioned Faith. Faith was learning about the Christian journey, but we didn't help the situation by feeding her discouragement because we didn't tell her that God can be silent and slow in answering our prayers. We never fed her the truth that delay was the order of the day many times. That might have cleared up her arteries. We never told her about the reality that praying meant waiting unlike those who approach prayer like rubbing a Jeannie bottle to make a wish to receive whatever is desired immediately. Faith was not smiling and there were no answers to her questions. Why did my child die from cancer? Why did my spouse cheat on me? Why can't I get pregnant? Why did I lose my job? Why did a 15-year-old kill five people in Raleigh a few days ago? Why do I feel so alone? Why is the world in such a mess? Why aren't you answering my prayers God? Why is my heart failing? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

I don't know. When the Son of Man comes, will he find Faith on earth? That's the question of the hour for the family of faith. When you do your daily routine and life is tough and you see a discouraged Faith lying on her bed of despair with her bleeding heart because of unanswered prayers, what then? Will he find Faith on earth? The other questions in this passage have definitive answers. Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones? Yes. Will he delay long in helping them? No. But, will he find Faith on earth? Maybe? I know he'll find us worrying about our 401Ks and retirement pensions. I know he may find us still bickering over denominational dogma and social issues. I know he may find us trying to figure out why the Blue devils lost to the Tarheels last night? But will he find Faith on earth? Faith has always been the one who has made us well like with the ten lepers. Faith has been the one who has always saved us like with the blind beggar by the side of the road. But now Faith is no longer able to be the caretaker, the pastor. Faith is the one in need of pastoral care and you know how hard it is to pastor pastors! What happens when the heart of Faith begins to lose its blood? What happens when Faith, our Faith, gets tired? We can't lose Faith now. If it was up to us, Faith might be dead because of what we fed her. But it's not up to us.

It's up to God. For even during these trying times, as she lays flat on her back on the bed of despair, Faith is forced to look up. Our Faith. Sometimes I call her "my faith." Now, "My Faith looks up to thee, thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior divine!" Is this the same Faith? How is this possible after all she's been through?

Well, when the family of faith left her the other day, they left Faith a green Gideon's Bible. Her heart was fainting, but the eyes of Faith still worked so she decided to open up to the passage they read to her. And she realized that they forgot to read what Jesus promises after he tells the parable about the widow and the judge. She began to read aloud and though the arteries of the heart of Faith were clogged, she could still hear the word of God, the promises of Jesus Christ. And despite her struggles, and despite lying flat on her back, Faith was standing on the promises of Christ, his word, not the word of faith, but the Word of God. And as she read the word, it was as if the Word read her life, the Word was speaking to her heart, making promises only he could keep.

To her, the most important part of the passage is this: "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.” This made all the difference to Faith because the emphasis is on the unjust judge’s eventual yielding to the widow’s persistent plea, not on the widow herself. Jesus basically preaches the bad guy here, the unjust judge, and not the widow. He doesn’t say watch her, follow her, imitate her. He says, “listen to the judge.” Jesus stresses the giving of justice, the Giver of Justice, a giving God. If an unjust judge will give justice and answer pleas, how much more will a just God give justice and answer prayers? Like any good sermon, Jesus has one sermonic theme about prayer—it’s not us, but God—will not God grant justice? Will God delay? God will quickly grant justice. God will do right by you—that’s justice. God will right what is wrong.

Faith is learning that God will do right by her despite her circumstances. Faith is learning that prayer is all about God. Faith is learning that the sustenance of the Christian life is dependent on God, not on Faith. Faith is turning her attention to a caring God and away from her health predicament. Faith is recognizing that she doesn’t have to lose heart anymore when she doesn’t get the answers she wants when she wants, because she realizes that prayer is about a God who will eventually answer her call, a God who will do right by her, a God who will give her justice, a God who will eventually come to her aid. Faith is beginning to see that prayer is about not seeing God and not seeing answers but still believing in a God you cannot see, trusting God’s track record of mighty acts throughout history. Faith even thinks that this biblical pericope shouldn’t be called the “parable of the persistent widow” but instead the parable of a persistent God—a God who’s always willing to grant justice, despite a fainthearted Faith. That’s what Jesus promises to Faith. And we know God fulfills God’s promises. But Faith abides between a loving promise and hope for its fulfillment. All Faith has is a word of promise and Faith is taking God’s promises to heart.

I really don’t think we’re going to lose Faith now. Faith is still in bed, wearied from life’s storms, and not fully recovered; I don’t think she’ll ever be perfect. But Faith is standing on the promises of God and this word is starting to pump some new life and blood back into her heart. This word is spiritual medicine for her soul. She can’t do much activity right now but she’s starting to pray again because Faith without doing any kind of work would be dead. She wants to be active, and prayer has become, what the reformer John Calvin calls, the “chief exercise of faith.” But she knows that her life is not totally dependent on her, Faith, but dependent on the Word of promise. Faith knows that sometimes all we have is a promise, a Word, but this word is not any kind of word, but a word, once God speaks it, will not come back void. A word that does something. A word that creates something out of nothing. A word that is sent and heals our diseases. A word that can just speak and someone be made whole. A word that stills storms. This word does something. This word promises “I will not forget you.” This word promises Faith “I will give you a new heart.” And this Word of promise, goes all the way to Jerusalem, to give blood on a cross in order to keep the heart of Faith beating. This Word started the Red Cross to fulfill his promise. And Faith is so grateful. You can tell by her heartbeat. Do you hear it?