

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 20, 2013, dedicated to Wyeth Archer Rowley on his baptismal day, to Grace Glaros and all children on Children's Sabbath, to honor all the organizers I have known who have pushed me to do justice and to the memory of Mattie Jones, to the prophets of old and the prophets rising anew and always to the glory of God!*

# **“Relentless Faith”\***

## **Luke 18: 1-8**

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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I fell in love with her in the back pew of a Baptist Church. She was one of the most beautiful women I had ever met. Her name was Mattie Jones and she was a daughter of former slaves.

As a young seminarian, I was registering voters and at 92 years old, Mattie was about to become a first time voter. As we sat together, Mattie asked, “*Can I really do this? Won’t I get in trouble?*” I smiled and responded, “*Yes! But, it is a good sort of trouble!*” She smiled back and with the stroke of a pen, this faithful woman began her venture into the world of electoral politics. Eyesight fading, mind still sharp, this daughter of the South was excited but a bit unsure.

One-hundred and twenty-one years had passed since the Emancipation Proclamation, 17 years since the Voter Rights Bill of 1965, but Mattie had never voted, believing it was not safe to do so. Her descendants had been in America for over 200 years, and yet she had never participated in its democratic process. Since her family’s first hundred years were trapped by slavery and the second

hundred years trapped by racism and slavery's residual effects, Mattie had never said "yes" or "no" to this experiment we call democracy.

A young white man from Philadelphia and old black woman from Mississippi began our preparation for Connecticut's mid-term election in 1982. What we shared in common was our Christian faith and a voter registration card. I read her the non-partisan voter's guides on candidates and various issues. Peppered with commentary, like "He's a fool," or "Does he really believe that nonsense?," this new student in electoral politics was a quick learner and was loving her newfound freedom.

As I sat with Mattie, these words from Langston Hughes' poem "Freedom came to mind":

*Freedom will not come  
Today, this year,  
Nor ever  
Through compromise and fear . . .  
Freedom  
Is a strong seed  
Planted  
In a great need.  
I live here too;  
I want freedom  
Just as you.*

On Election Day, I drove Mattie to the polls. She asked me to go into the voting booth. I explained I couldn't. But as I sat outside the booth listening to her reading everything aloud, I smiled and cried. Her running commentary was priceless: "There he is . . . God bless you, Bruce! . . . Don't forget about me when you go to Washington and become famous! . . . I'm against this issue, it will hurt my great-grandchildren . . . never in my lifetime will I vote for a racist . . . This one's for you, momma and papa!"

When Mattie emerged from behind the curtain, her face shined like the bright morning star. She threw her arms around me and

said, *“Thank you Tim and thank you, Jesus! I can’t wait to do it again!”*

Mattie Jones has long since died, but her spirit lives on. In fact, her spirit was born in a place that is deep, abiding and prophetic. It is a place in the human heart and the prophecies of God that call each one of us to live and act justly in this world. Her spirit comes from a place that calls us each of us to bother God and to bother one another.

In today’s Gospel, Luke 18:1-8, we meet another one of God’s saints who comes from the place in which justice and righteousness meet. The pesky widow comes to the judge crying, *“Give me justice. Protect me!”* Although we don’t know what the widow needs, it is not hard to guess. Since she is a widow, her case probably concerns her dead husband’s estate. She could not inherit it, so the estate goes straight to her sons or her brother-in-law. She is allowed to live off it unless someone is trying to cheat her out of it. One can only imagine this is the case.

This judge is not a respectable judge. By his own admission, he does not fear God or respect any person. He doesn’t suffer as one who struggles to separate faith and politics! Maybe he thinks his disrespect for God and all people makes him a better judge – more impartial, or something like that. Whatever the case, God doesn’t get to him. People do not get to him. But, this widow gets to him, at least partially because she throws a mean right punch. Although the English does not show the humor, in the Greek, the judge uses a boxing term for the widow. He says, *“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 **with continued blows under the eye.**”* She is giving him a black eye!

**He acts out of self-interest.** His self-interest for responding to the widow is not equity or justice but conceit. This judge does not want to walk around town with a black eye. He also doesn’t want to make up stories about how he got it. Anyone seeing how the widow has been tearing into him day and night will know where he got it. Since he cannot stand that idea, the judge grants the widow justice

simply to save his face. (Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way, Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass., 1999, p. 200).

**Isn't this the way justice is all too often granted?** It is granted by judges, elected leaders and others with power and money and the law on their side who feel bothered by widows, orphans, immigrants, children and the disenfranchised poor when they become organized. Such leaders will grant justice to save their faces. We would like to believe they do it for the right reasons, and some do. But, when such leaders have no respect for God, for the law of Moses, or for people, it takes the **organized** and **bothersome** cry of those for whom persistence is their only path to break through injustice.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way: "*Justice delayed in is justice denied.*" Someone just like this pesky widow must have stopped by the King household, too! He knew her face and her voice. The difference is he responded to her cries for all the right reasons. "***Give me justice,***" the widow yelled at the judge. "***Do your job! Answer me now or answer me later, but I will be coming back every day and every night – forever – until you deal with me.***" So he dealt with her. But the passage doesn't end where justice is granted. At the end of the story, Jesus asks, "*And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on Earth?*" You get the feeling that Jesus didn't know many persistent widows, or at least not enough of them! Actually, the world knows too few of them...

The prophets come to us as those who are widowed, those who are poor and those who speak from their heart and the pain of their existential life experience. The prophets speak to us as those who worn out by rhetoric that produce little or no action, rhetoric that protects the rich and keeps a black eye from the rich. They meet us in the back pews of Baptist churches and they awaken within us the voice of God.

In his classic book, The Prophets, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes of the biblical prophets:

**What manner of man is the prophet?** *A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he were going from the realm of the sublime to the area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into orations about widows, orphans, and the corruption of judges and affairs of the marketplace. Instead of showing us the way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums. . . . The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world. . . . To us a single act of injustice - cheating in business, exploitation of the poor - is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of people; to the prophets, it is deathblow to human existence. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor . . . it is a form of living, a crossing point of God and humanity. God is raging in the prophet's words. (Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets, Harper and Row, NY, NY, 1962, pp.3-5)*

**The passion of God is raging when the prophet speaks.** Our God cannot be still when even one of God's beloved children is suffering. Why is it then that we are so amenable to stillness in the face of injustice? In each of our lives, there has been some prophet who has struck a nerve within us.

**Who is it that has pushed a button in your life?** I know someone in your life has pushed you, prodded you and forced you to look at the world around you with new eyes. Some prophetic voice has bothered you and you haven't liked the prospect of having a black eye. I am sure the prophets of your life have believed in God and a democratic and just society. They know the truth of which Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once spoke: "*We can have democracy or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few. We cannot have both.*"

Knowing this, the prophets prick our conscience and push us to be engaged in the battle for democracy. In eulogizing William Sloane Coffin seven years ago, Bill Moyers told a story he had heard first from Joseph Campbell. In the story, a man turns a corner and

sees a brawl in the middle of the block. He runs right up to the fight and asks, “*Is this a private fight or can anyone get in?*” Democracy is everybody’s fight. To quote Bill Coffin, “*Sign up, jump in and fight on.*”

In the spirit of Mattie Jones and the persistent widow; in the spirit of the great Hebrew prophets, you and I have to move beyond the belief that justice is a “good idea” and make it a reality. Good ideas don’t change injustice in this world. Action against injustice changes the world.

Seventeen years ago, I was one of the founding pastors of the BREAD Organization, which stands for Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity. First Church entered BREAD four years later. For the last 17 years (and at First for 13 years), BREAD has fought for justice in public education, to end crime on the streets, to increase good paying jobs, to end discrimination against immigrants, and safe and secure housing for the poor – among a few issues on our plates. We have organized. We have mobilized. We have agitated. We have found ways to unite tens of thousands of members from 54 synagogues, mosques and churches.

In our state and each community in central Ohio, there are leaders who, either through arrogance or ignorance, are not doing justice for the poor with the tens of millions of dollars we have entrusted to their care. So, I am not comfortable walking away and simply feeling good about all of the goodness God has placed in our hearts. I hope you are not either. **We need to organize.** We need to activate. If we do not bother the unjust judges of our world, they will happily continue to do injustice (which translated might mean “**do nothing at all**”).

It is never too late. We must stand up for justice and organize our congregation. As pastors and rabbis, we must lead our people to DO justice! Words are not enough! Church and synagogue musicians, through the power of song, give voice to the cries of the poor not only from the chancel but in city hall! When our political leaders hear the ancient Hebrew words of justice bouncing off their glorious pillars, they will know that the God of Abraham and Sarah;

of Jesus and Mary; of Peter and Paul has arrived to give them a black eye until justice is done! As lay people, don't sit back and wait for me or Janine, for Mark Williams or Kevin Jones to step up and speak out! Come and "bother" us. Have one-to-one conversation with us and insist that we do justice and not just read Bible passages, utter liturgical prayers or prance around in our pretty gowns preaching and singing about justice!

I know from my own experience, some of you will tell me what you don't like about your community organizing. You will tell me that it is not proper. You will say it is not polite. You will tell me that I have crossed the line between pious faith and political action. You will tell me to work behind closed doors and cut a few deals.

But, instead you should tell me that your forbearers didn't immigrate to this land, or come out of slavery to be polite and proper. Miriam's song on the desert side of freedom was not polite! Jesus was not polite in the temple when he liberated the poor by flipping the moneychangers' tables and driving thieves out of sacred places. It is time for Miriam to dance her freedom dance and Jesus' drive for justice to be felt into our synagogues, churches and city halls!

We need to tell our public officials that there are things we don't like in our community - like vast numbers of poor people who have no homes, no health care, no hope. They are our neighbors and God commands us to love them. Tell our public officials you don't like your neighbors having bad jobs with bad pay, in bad neighborhoods with bad crime and bad schools that too often lead to bad prisons. Tell them this gives us all a black eye! Tell them this must change and God has placed us here to be holy special agents for change! Tell them and then organize them!

Remember Rabbi Heschel: *"God is raging in the prophet's words."*

As you go out today, close your eyes and you will see the smile on the face of one of America's most beautiful women, Mattie Jones. As we "sign up, jump in and fight on" for justice, I entreat you to

carry Mattie's words in your hearts as she emerged from the voting booth so many years ago: "*This one's for you, Momma and Papa! . . . This one's for you!*" Amen.

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*\* This sermon was based on a sermon I delivered on Luke 18:1-8 this text at Chataugua, New York in 2008.*

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