

Sermon Sunday, October 20, 2013

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated the small Latin America country of Honduras. Cascades of torrential rain caused massive landslides, destroying thousands of small homes built precariously on mountainous hillsides. A year and a half later, members of King's Chapel traveled there with Habitat for Humanity to build new homes. They stayed in the capital city of Tegucigalpa, and each day drove out a twisting mountain road to the build site.

One of those who went was Brooke Chandler, the daughter of our member Fay Larkin, and step-daughter of Miguel Gomez-Ibanez. Brooke, then a teenager, wrote this, which her aunt, Julie Hyde, shared with me this week:

"Along the road we drove each day to the work site," wrote Brooke, "a cliff reaching high above us [was] on our left, and a clear drop fell off to our right. We could see pieces of houses hanging on to cliffs. The houses that had slid down [in the hurricane] still filled up the sides of mountains, splattered with the colors of clothes and trash. Everything in the houses was left as it had fallen, including the people, *a year and a half later!*...There [had been] no resources available to make it possible to get to [the people], and no proper medical care even if someone [had been] still alive in the rubble."

Travel on the steep mountainside roads was dangerous, Brooke explained, and "we would often see stake bed trucks piled way beyond their capacities with people...We were told that [one] section of the road was affectionately named 'death row.' Cars, people, produce, animals and buses were known to just go over the edge. This was not a big deal. There were no ambulances, no news stories, no guardrails put up, no names identified: it was just daily life.

Death was different there. And Hondurans had learned to accept it. It happened, no one pretended it didn't, and there was nothing to do about it anyway...

[W]e started getting used to the ride, most of us had even stopped gripping our seats and staring wide-eyed out of the window...We had also developed a necessary feeling of surrender, an acceptance for whatever might happen. We had no choice but to view death lightly in order to deal with it all...."

On the last weekend of the trip, says Brooke, as they were passing another car, a Mack truck suddenly appeared around a bend in the mountain road, heading right for them on the mountain cliff road.

"I knew I was going to die..." wrote Brooke, and the others there knew it, too. "In those four seconds of my life...none of [my thoughts] were American. None of them were the thoughts of someone living in a place where help, should we go over [the cliff], would be on its way, where people would stop and wonder what they could do to assist. [Rather, in my last thoughts]...I hoped our landing would be a quick bang with no survivors. I knew that we would be left there until we died, if death didn't come on impact. We would be left there to rot for years until we had fully

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decomposed. And it would be no big deal. Half a day's news for anyone who had noticed..."

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When did you first have the insight that Brooke had: that the world looks very different, depending on where you fit on the world's totem pole. That there are conditions that might cause some of us to protest and strain against, which others feel they must accept as a given in life. That some people live haunted by whether anyone would come to their help if they were hurt, whether anyone could come to help. The insight that many live with scant hope that life can be changed for the better.

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In Boston, we know, people also live with a dearth of hope, the sense that their death would be seen as "no big deal." I saw it when I worked in the US Attorney's Office, in the resignation of too many young people: those who know other kids shot and killed, and assume it can easily happen to them. Kids who see no future for themselves, because the adults they know are trapped in multiple low-paying jobs, working themselves ragged but never getting ahead.

With this outlook, the basic safety precautions some parents try so hard to instill in their children --like wearing a seat belt or not smoking-- seem completely irrelevant. They don't even come up in conversation.

Even in a remarkable place like this -- King's Chapel -- we know that a tough, discouraging past impacts our sense of hope for the future. We get tired. We stop noticing all the little things, like furniture still broken, or junk accumulating in the corners of our buildings or even hearts. It's been there so long we accept it as just the ways things are, the way they seem to have been for a long time.

And it's true, we can't do it all. There are some things we need to accept. But what is the line between healthy acceptance of our limitations and giving up in despair? As the Serenity Prayer teaches, what is the line between the acceptance of the things we cannot change, and courage to change the things we can?

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Jesus didn't want us to land on the wrong side of that divide. He didn't want us to "lose heart," he said. That's why he told the story -- the parable -- in today's gospel lesson, about the widow and the unfair judge.

John Dominic Crossan thinks Jesus told this story as one would tell a joke -- Jesus as the great raconteur set up two well known stereotypes to which everyone in the crowd would nod their heads in recognition. On one side is the nagging woman who

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simply will not relent; the one you can't ignore even though you want to; the proverbial mother-in-law who keeps making the same irritating point over and over; the neighbor who, when you see his face through the peephole, you tiptoe away from, pretending you're not at home....

Jesus would raise his eyebrows, so you know he sympathizes. Everyone smiles. Yep, at some point we'd all just give that annoying widow what she wants, just to make her go away!

Jesus' other character in the story is a second type of person everyone knew – the corrupt politician. The one who will help – that is, for the right price. The elected judge who just happens to always rule on the side of his major contributors.

The crowd knows all about unjust judges. They are Jews in a homeland controlled by an occupying Roman army. They are Galileans whose accent gives them away to the more sophisticated Jerusalem city folk. They are poor – dirt poor. Reza Aslan, in his current best-seller, The Zealot, makes a solid case that Jesus was far less the artisan master carpenter of my Sunday School illustrated Bible, and far more likely a construction worker, eeking out a living in the grind of a minimum wage day worker.

Jesus and his listeners knew about injustice. And he didn't want them to lose heart in the face of it.

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Losing heart. It's a real issue, isn't it? In Honduras. In struggling parts of our city. In our own church. For all of us as individuals, whenever we struggle. How do we not lose heart, in the face of injustice, or simply in the face of daunting realities?

What keeps us from despair, from giving up? What keeps us keeping on, knocking again at the door where someone sees us coming and tiptoes away....

When I first signed on to fight and prevent crime in Boston, a good and thoughtful friend said to me, "Why would you do that? You'll never succeed...."

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How do we not lose heart? The answer isn't just perseverance. We could be tempted to reach this conclusion from the parable: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

But that's too simplistic. Perseverance is part of the truth, but it's not the whole truth. Not when the powers arrayed against you are as daunting as the Roman Empire, or as daunting as Honduran poverty. Solely preaching perseverance is a

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glib, cruel answer, that places all the burden for change on the widow suffering injustice.

Jesus never preached that bottom line. Jesus stood *with* the poor widow, *against* injustice. The unfair judge needed to change his stance, and to the extent any of us are part and parcel of injustice, *we* are the ones called to change.

But to the extent that the widow must keep persevering, too, how does she do it? How does she not lose heart? According to Jesus, she knows that she and God are on the same team; she is not alone.

That's what Jesus means when he says we need to be persistent "*in prayer.*" He isn't asking us to bow our heads constantly, hands clasped, knees bent – though for some, and for some times, these may be ways you choose to pray.

No, when Jesus said be persistent in prayer, he meant it as St. Francis of Assisi said [quote]: "Pray without ceasing. If necessary, use words." When it comes to battling injustice, pray by living with God, alongside God, taking on the Power of Justice and Love and of all Creation. Live by knowing that that power lives within you.

Experiencing that, partnering with God, you can persevere, together relentlessly pounding on the door of injustice. God is not the one on whose door we need to pound – it's *with* God that we break down the door of injustice.

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Latin American Gustavo Gutierrez, now a professor at Notre Dame, has seen the impact of the many in Latin America who have not simply accepted the tragedy of their poverty, the power held by few, and the corruption of their leaders. Many, often led by priests and nuns, over the last decades have bravely taken on dictators and drug lords, "see[ing] themselves as the people of God called to the Promised Land."

They "know that the fight for justice will be a long and arduous journey," but they continue in their work, because in it -- in the very midst of their suffering and struggles -- they have had an encounter with God...*This experience of God's presence gives them the strength to be faithful to the struggle even when immediate results are not visible.*" The people of Latin America are on a journey in which they have "already met the One for whom they are searching." (ix)

Seeing this, Gustavo Gutierrez is convinced that despair is overcome by hope built upon a concrete, deep experience of a loving God in your life. Hope isn't born from a creed or a theory. It's born from suffering and struggling, where God has nevertheless been present, and you know it. You see, when you already have what you want most dearly – a place, an identity, God's love – that *sets you free* to work in the service of a God's kingdom.

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You can be clear sighted about the causes of injustice: it's not God's will that you be trampled; God wants to free you from that. God wants you to insist on a full and complete life here on this earth, knowing that if that insistence costs you your life; even death will not separate you from God.

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In Boston, Howard Thurman taught the same lesson. Rev. Thurman was a professor at Boston University, Dean of Marsh Chapel, and mentor to his student, Martin Luther King. Howard Thurman wrote one of my favorite books: Jesus and the Disinherited, a powerful volume that in 1949 lay asked this question: What does Jesus have to say to the people with their backs up against the wall? Thurman laid bare the ugly injustice of racism and segregation in America, and found in Jesus' way of life, the answer to it.

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Thurman's book echoes the conclusion Brooke Chandler came to in Honduras: that "there are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person." (39) It "attacks the fundamental sense of self-respect and personal dignity, without which a man is no man." (38) "...In the absence of all hope ambition dies, and the very self is weakened, corroded." (46)... There are some things that are worse than death. To deny one's own integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things." (51)

Yet, writes Thurman, "the awareness that a man is a child of the God ...creates a profound faith in life that nothing can destroy...[God] holds the stars in their appointed places, leaves his mark in every living thing. *And he cares for me!... To the degree to which a man knows this, he is unconquerable from within and without* (56)....

"When I was a youngster," said Thurman, "this was drilled into me by my grandmother ....[She'd learned it from a] slave minister who, on occasion, held secret religious meetings with his fellow slaves. How everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when, in her recital, [my grandmother] would come to the triumphant climax of the slave minister: 'You - you are not niggers. You - you are not slaves. You are God's children.'"

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Friends, do not lose heart. You are loved by God, now and already. Some of you may weary of this message from me. I've heard it said that there are only words, and it's true. The real test of what I say, is how I show that love, in actions. And I know I don't always love as I could.

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But I must keep offering this message, and will keep trying to live into it myself, because it's the most important thing I've leaned in my life, and I want to keep sharing it. I can't stop from sharing it.

So if *my* testimony is suspect, hear the testimony of Dr. Rev. Howard Thurman and of Father Gustavo Gutierrez, who can tell you what they've seen and heard the world over – that to experience God and Eternal Love beside us, within us, upholding us as we speak out for justice, makes all the difference. It sustains hope when none is objectively warranted. It makes a way through rivers and deserts.

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What should we have the serenity to accept, and what should we have the courage to change? When you see injustice, do not accept it. Be persistent seeking justice and peace.

Stand with those who need help. When you need help, ask for it. Know that each person – without exception – is a precious and remarkable creation, worthy of dignity and respect. Including you.

Come into this place where that is proclaimed. And leave this place, enacting it. Like a teenager named Brooke Chandler.

May it be so.