

“A Powerful Widow!”

By Steve Ramer, Pastor

Oct. 18, 2020

Scripture

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray at all times and never to lose heart. And this is what he said, “Once there was a judge in this town who neither feared God nor cared about people.

In that same town there was a widow who kept coming to him and demanding: “Give me justice against my opponent.”

For a while he refused; but eventually he said to himself, “I’m not afraid of God and I don’t care about people, but this widow keeps pestering me. So I’m going to give her justice, or else she’ll keep coming back again and again until she wears me out.”

And the Lord said, “Did you hear what the corrupt judge says. Do you really think God won’t hand out justice to God’s chosen ones - those who call on him day and night? Do you really think God will put them off in helping them? I’m telling you, God will give them justice and give it quickly.

Sermon

Now I don’t know if you aware of this but there is an election going on?

In fact, if you listen to the news at all you might have heard that this year’s election has already broken many previous records for early turnout.

Prognosticators are also saying that in the end, voter participation will surpass, by a wide margin, any presidential election in recent memory.

Some pundits out there are actually calling this the most consequential election in the history of the United States!

Major changes could be in the offing.

Not only is the incumbent President facing historic unfavorable ratings, but the Senate looks likely to switch control as well. If this is true the then one party will control the House, Senate and the Presidency, thus setting a new legislative agenda.

But we also know that attempts at voter disenfranchisement, through disinformation, suppression and all kinds of voter intimidation are also at an all- time high.

It is likely that some of us have become quite cynical as we age since we have failed to see much change occur, regardless of which political party is in charge.

And yet voting is still one of the most powerful nonviolent tools that can affect change in our country.

Who actually gets to vote, both legally and practically, we also know has been an evolving and often a dark part of our nation's history.

This past August we celebrated 100 years of women finally being enfranchised throughout the US!
(Still less than half of our country's existence!)

Just look around you this morning and consider who all in this zoom would not have been allowed to vote in most states in 1920!

And though black men were given the right to vote nearly 60 years earlier, both black men and then women had to wait until the 1960s, only 50 years ago, in order to freely and safely participate.

And all of those changes only resulted after decades of persistent active Protest, as well as the beating, imprisonment and deaths of many in both the woman's suffrage and the civil rights movements.

For some reason, it seems, the powerful in our nation have always tried to limit who gets to vote?

I'm sure that many of you are familiar with what happened in Selma, AL in the early months of 1965.

And if you haven't seen the movie, *Selma*, I would highly encourage you do so, especially if you are tempted to think that voting doesn't matter.

The Selma to Montgomery marches were actually three protest marches, held in 1965, along the 54-mile route from Selma, to the state capital of Alabama in Montgomery.

The marches were organized by non-violent activists to demonstrate the desire of African-American citizens throughout the south to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

It also occurred after more than two years of active organizing and in defiance of nearly 100 years of segregationist repression.

By highlighting racial injustice, these marches contributed mightily to passage later that year of the Voting Rights Act, a landmark federal achievement of the civil rights movement.

The first march took place on Sunday March 7, 1965, and will forever be emblazoned upon our national conscious.

That morning, Alabama State troopers along with local posses, attacked the unarmed marchers with billy clubs and tear gas as they passed over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The event is now known as Bloody Sunday as pictures and newsreels broadcast the images of those lying wounded

on the bridge around the world.

The second march took place two days later on March 9, This time with MLK and leaders of all faiths participating. This time the troopers, police, and marchers again confronted each other, but when the troopers stepped aside to let them pass.

Dr. King decided to lead the marchers back to a church. That night, a white group beat and murdered civil rights activist James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister from Boston, who had responded to the call for clergy to come to Selma.

The violence of "Bloody Sunday" and Reeb's murder, along with the earlier killing of Jimmy Lee Jackson, resulted in national outcry finally pushing the Johnson administration to provide military protection for the third and final march, which did make it to the capitol steps in Montgomery.

A new federal voting rights law was passed in a joint session of Congress that following summer on August 6, 1965.

Certainly, this did not fix all problems around voter rights, especially since voter suppression throughout our nation still occurs. But those marchers and organizers did prevail.

And according to Jesus, God's justice will eventually prevail. Because God does hear our cries for justice here on earth and God does desire that all, especially those who are the poorest and weakest in our society, receive just and equal treatment.

Sometimes this will take the dogged determination and persistent perseverance of all of us.

In Jesus' story it was a poor widow, one who was at the very other extreme from the unjust judge in wealth, power and status who did it.. But we must never forget that similar progress in our time is still often made by these same folks and in the very same way. The poor, even widows are the ones who still can make a difference as it was during the voting rights movement in Selma, AL in 1965.

Amelia Isadora Platts Boynton Robinson was born in the south on August 18, 1911.

She and her husband were teachers and lived in Georgia prior to moving to Selma, where in 1963, her husband Samuel died.

It was during this time that she became one of the key activists and leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement as a prominent figure in the 1965 Selma marches.

In 1964, Boynton ran for the Congress from Alabama,

hoping to encourage black registration and voting, becoming the first female African American to run for office in Alabama.

In 1965, Selma had a population that was 50 percent black but only 300 of the town's African-American residents were registered. But by March 1966, after passage of the Voting Rights Act, 11,000 black citizens had registered to vote.

She was also there on that fateful Sunday along with John Lewis and she too was beaten along with the other demonstrators after they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Boynton was beaten unconscious and a photograph of her lying on Edmund Pettus Bridge went around the world. *"Then they charged. They came from the right. They came from the left. One [of the troopers] shouted: 'Run!' I thought, 'Why should I be running?' Then an officer on horseback hit me across the back of the shoulders and, for a second time, on the back of the neck. I lost consciousness."* she would later recall.

Boynton also suffered throat burns from the effects of tear gas. But she would manage to participate in both of the subsequent marches, and on March 24 she too arrived in Montgomery along with 25,000 other marchers.

But that was not the last time she would cross that bridge. In 2015, with John Lewis and President Barack Obama at her side, she would cross that bridge again, this time in wheelchair, to recognize the 50th Anniversary of that earlier Bloody Sunday!

In recent days we have seen many images of the long lines of masked voters, socially distanced, by the thousands, in places like Georgia and Texas waiting for hours to cast their votes.

It made me recall similar pictures from South Africa in the 90's when apartheid fell and millions of newly enfranchised voters were allowed to freely cast their votes for the first time.

We should be similarly inspired by what is happening now as we hear the stories of those who sometimes wait for up to eight hours to non-violently seek to change our current corrupt political and societal condition.

As believers in the non-violent way of Jesus we must applaud these courageous folks.

And we must also fully participate! We too must work tirelessly with persistent perseverance to make sure that we never lose this non-violent tool and we too must be willing to persuade those unjust or uncaring leaders, in our nation, or in our state and even locally here in Ft Collins.

We should never assume that they will do the right things on their own and like the widow we may need to simply “wear them down!”

And as we also consider the efforts of the widow Amelia Boyton, as well as the efforts of so many widows and grandmothers, and mothers and daughters who fought for the right to vote over decades, we must continue to work for justice and equality if we desire to truly honor their memories.

As MLK often said, progressive change is not inevitable but it requires the struggle and sacrifices of good people for justice to come. And it will come, but only when our imaginations are inspired and when our feet also hit the pavement.

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