Malcolm Clemens Young Jeremiah 31:27-34

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2C44 Psalm 119:97-104

19 Pentecost (Proper 24C) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Sunday 16 October 2022 Children’s Sabbath Luke 18:1-8

**Ernest Hemingway’s Faith**

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God” (Jer. 31).

“When the Son of humanity comes will he find faith on earth” (Lk. 18)? These words from two thousand years ago are the defining question of our time. This week the House Committee on the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol concluded its hearings. We have seen indisputable evidence that politicians continue to use false claims of electoral fraud to secure their own power.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Last month the governors of Florida and Texas falsely promised jobs and resettlement help to asylum seekers who they sent to Washington, D.C. and Martha’s Vineyard. They used immigrants, including children, as part of a political stunt.[[2]](#endnote-2) This action echoes the way that black southerners were bused out of the south by segregationist White Citizens’ Councils to cities with prominent integrationist leaders in 1962.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This week in Ukraine and Iran ordinary people were slaughtered because of a distant political agenda, because of an ideology. Here at home we see terrible poverty and neglect on our own streets. “When the Son of humanity comes, will he find faith on earth?”

In the face of the heartbreaking cruelty and dishonesty of his own time Jesus tells his friends, “a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (Lk. 18). Jesus tells this story near the end of his own journey to Jerusalem, as he talks about the end of time when God’s realm of justice, peace and love will come.

The Hebrew Bible frequently demands that the powerful have a special responsibility to widows, strangers and orphans. These groups are vulnerable because they have no male relatives to defend them. Although widows in the Bible (like in the stories of Ruth or Elijah and the widow of Zarephath) often model tenacity, resourcefulness and initiative, they represent vulnerability just as the judge symbolizes power.

In several sections of Luke’s Gospel he uses a “how much more” argument. “If you then, who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Lk. 11:13).[[4]](#endnote-4) This parable uses this same logic.

A widow comes to a judge seeking justice. He does not believe in God. Nor does he respect people. He refuses to help her until he reasons that, “because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out” (Lk. 18). Let me point out two ways in which the Greek version differs from the English translation. When the judge says that he does not want the widow to “wear him out” the Greek word for this is hupopiazē. It is an expression from boxing. It means to literally give someone a black eye. The judge doesn’t want the widow to embarrass him or injure his reputation.

Second, the Greek more strongly conveys urgency, impatience and conviction. Greek uses double negatives to add emphasis. It’s almost as if Jesus raises his voice to underline what he means. A more literal version might be, “And will **not** God give vengeance to his chosen ones who are crying day and night? And be impatient to help them!”[[5]](#endnote-5)

The point is not that God resembles the unjust judge. In almost every respect Jesus describes God as the opposite. The judge is self-centered. He only uses people. But God is full of love, impatient for his children to thrive. Jesus is unafraid to be humiliated for our sake. The purpose of this “how much more” story is for us to trust God and to persist in prayer.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Today I want to give you one picture of a faithless world and then to consider how faith humanizes us.

1. In college I knew a woman whose favorite story was Ernest Hemmingway's "The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber." This always worried me about her partly because of the story's misogyny but mostly because of its position with regard to faith.

We meet Francis Macomber as a thirty-five year old American business tycoon on safari in East Africa. As the story unfolds we gradually come to realize that he has committed the cardinal sin in the universe of Hemingway fiction. The day before he betrayed his manliness and ran in fear from a wounded lion who had been concealed in the tall grass.

Margot, his wife, does not try to comfort him in his humiliation. Instead, she despises this act of cowardice and as a consequence she sleeps with the safari leader that night. Hemmingway also seems to hate his own fictitious character, because he wouldn't leave his wife, because "he would take anything" from her.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The next day the group goes in pursuit of a dangerous buffalo. Then, suddenly, in an almost religious conversion, Macomber changes. Hemmingway writes, that “[f]or the first time in his life he felt wholly without fear. Instead of fear he had a feeling of definite elation.” The safari leader admires this new courage. His wife fears it because she no longer has the power to make him ashamed of being afraid.

Why is it called a "Short Happy Life"? Only moments later as Macomber tries to flush the buffalo out of the long grass, “he [feels] a sudden white-hot, blinding flash explode inside his head and that was all he ever felt.” Although his wife claimed she was aiming at the buffalo, she shot him in the back of the head.

When the son of man comes will he find faith on earth? In Hemmingway's universe there is no faith. Men can never depend on women, or on other men. Every person is either a conquest or an adversary. The individual can only rely on an elusive courage that comes miraculously from within, an irrational bravery which completely isolates each soul from all else.

2. The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr emphasizes that faith means more than merely faith in God. Faith concerns all the ways that we are connected to and support and depend on each other. “We see this possibility – that human history will come to its end… in the gangrenous corruption of a social life in which every promise, contract, treaty and “word of honor” is given and received in deception and distrust. If [human beings] can no longer have faith in each other, can they exist as [human beings]?”[[8]](#endnote-8)

What shall we do in this time before the second coming of Christ? We need to pray and not lose hope. We also need to strive to be people of honesty and integrity, to listen and care for others. To use the language of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) we need to treat people as ends rather than as means to our own goals. The heartbreaking sin of this judge was his inability to see the widow as a person.

I have a friend named Sue Everson who is a world authority on hopelessness. As a medical researcher she studies the effect that hopelessness has on our health. One of her more startling statistics is that people who feel hopeless are twenty percent more likely to die in the next four years from a stroke. Hopelessness increases your chance of a stroke to the same degree that smoking a pack of cigarettes a day does. Sue scientifically studies how religion seems to make people less hopeless.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Today with churches around the world we celebrate the Children’s Sabbath. A central part of what we do together involves our care for children and families. We teach children how to listen spiritually, how to pray and not lose heart. Professor Lisa Miller has been our guest on the forum twice. She argues that denying our spirituality is not just untrue but unhealthy for us and especially for children.

Using new techniques ranging from twin studies to neuroimaging, scientists are coming to a new appreciation for just how important spirituality is for human flourishing. Miller claims that all children possess a kind of “natural spirituality.” This interest in the Holy, this, “direct sense of… the heartbeat of the living universe… precedes and transcends language, culture and religion.”[[10]](#endnote-10) This spirituality protects us, but not completely, from depression, anxiety and the tendency to misuse alcohol and drugs.

So what is the most important thing that we can do as adults for children? We can support their Sunday School teachers and the families who gather here. We can take their questions seriously. We can listen to them.[[11]](#endnote-11)

And so the conversation continues every week here. In life we are forever asking and being asked a simple question, “do you believe me?”[[12]](#endnote-12) Do you? Seeing what is happening in the world, it is easy to struggle with a crisis of trust right now. I trust God but I don’t know if the Son will find faith on earth. And yet at the same time I feel remarkably supported by the life I find at Grace Cathedral.

C.S. Lewis writes that, “Faith… is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of changing moods….” Because of this he says we need to pray and hold some of the Christian ideals in our mind for a period of time every day. We need to worship because, “We have to be continually reminded of what we believe… Belief has to be fed…” People do not cease to be Christian because of a good argument but because they simply drift away.

Kathleen Norris writes, “prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you can’t imagine. To be made more grateful, more able to see the good in what you have been given instead of always grieving for what might have been.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

My friends pray always and do not lose heart. Be trustworthy and care for the children. When the Son of humanity comes may he find faith on earth.

1. Alan Feuer, Luke Broadwater, Maggie Haberman, Katie Benner and Michael S. Schmidt, “Jan. 6: The Story So Far,” *The New York Times*, 14 October 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/us/politics/jan-6-timeline.html?name=styln-capitol-mob&region=TOP_BANNER&block=storyline_menu_recirc&action=click&pgtype=Article&variant=show&is_new=false> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Eileen Sullivan, “Is That Legal: How Scores of Migrants Came to be Shipped North,” *The New York Times*, 16 September 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/us/politics/migrants-marthas-vineyard-desantis.html?name=styln-marthas-vineyard-immigrants&region=TOP_BANNER&block=storyline_menu_recirc&action=click&pgtype=Article&variant=show&is_new=false> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/02/us/migrants-marthas-vineyard-desantis-texas.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jacey Fortin, “When Segregationists Offered One-Way Tickets to Black Southerners,” *The New York Times*, 14 October 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/02/us/migrants-marthas-vineyard-desantis-texas.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also, “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith!” (Lk. 12:28). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 22 Pent (10-16-16) 24C. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Hemingway cynically writes, "They had a sound basis of union. Margot was too beautiful for Macomber to divorce her and Macomber had too much money for Margot ever to leave him now." Ernest Hemingway, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemmingway* (NY: Scribners/Macmillan, 1987) 18. See also, 20 Pent (10-21-01) 24C. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. “We see this possibility – that human history will come to its end neither in a brotherhood of [humanity] nor in universal death under the blows of natural or man-made catastrophe, but in the gangrenous corruption of a social life in which every promise, contract, treaty and “word of honor” is given and received in deception and distrust. If [human beings] can no longer have faith in each other, can they exist as [human beings]?”

   H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* ed. Richard R. Niebuhr (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 20 Pent (10-17-04) 24C. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (NY: Picador, 2015) 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Miller quotes a parent who says, “I didn’t realize for a long time that when my child asks a question and I say, “I don’t know,” and just leave it at that, I’m actually stopping the conversation.” Ibid., 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* ed. Richard R. Niebuhr (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (NY: Riverhead Books, 1998) 60-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)