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Never Lose Heart

Luke 18:7

At a recent event sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life two brothers squared off on the question of God. Christopher Hitchens has for some years been one of the world's most famous atheists. But now he is struggling with a lethal form of cancer. When asked if this confrontation with his own mortality had changed his view of religion he said it had not. He replied, "If anything my contempt for the false consolation of religion has increased since I became aware that I probably don't have very long to live."

But Christopher's brother, Peter, is convinced that God is at the heart of our existence. He said:

There is actually no absolute right and wrong if there is no God...It seems to me to be very...hard to come up with an atheistic explanation of conscience any more than you could have a compass without a magnetic north. And if the magnetic north kept shifting then it would be very difficult to steer your boat or your plane across the Atlantic (Quoted by Linda Werthheimer, National Public Radio, October 13, 2010).

Peter went on to explain that he, too, had been an atheist as a young man but he later returned to his Anglican faith. His work as a journalist in Somalia and the former Soviet Union persuaded him that civilization without religious morality devolves into brutality. Believing in God means never losing heart in a brutal world.

The 18th chapter of Luke's gospel is written to a people who live in the grip of human brutality. Luke's church is trying to establish itself in an atmosphere of violent persecution. Luke sets out to encourage his people to believe that they can do more than survive in the midst of the cruel situation that surrounds them. They should not lose heart in the face of brutality because God has called them into being and is equipping them for a mission of grace.

Luke makes this point by recording Jesus' story about a widow who is looking for justice in an unfair world. She goes before a dishonest judge who is not very interested in justice. He has little regard for God or the needs of others. He is very much at home in a brutal world. But the widow never loses heart in her pursuit of justice. She continues to harass the judge until he renders a verdict that satisfies her need for justice. In the end the judge does the right thing because it is the only way he can get the woman off his back.

But Luke wants his people to understand that God is not like that. God's justice flows from a very different source. It is an expression of God's compassion. The beleaguered Christians of Luke's community can take heart because God is not comfortable with the brutality of our world. God's compassion is at work to confront and dismantle the brutality which threatens them. Luke's church is called to participate in God's compassion.

This is the message that Paul wanted to convey to Timothy. Timothy is a young church leader who looked to Paul as a mentor. Paul could see Timothy's potential to guide the church through the difficult years ahead. Paul wants Timothy to understand that this work does not depend on his talent or competence. Neither does it depend on a favorable cultural context. It depends on Timothy entering

fully into God's ministry of compassion. Paul knows that Timothy will suffer the persecution that will continue to be directed toward the early church. Paul wants Timothy to understand that the ministry God has set in motion cannot be defeated by the brutality of the world. When Timothy understands his ministry in those terms he will never lose heart.

This is the truth that undergirds our stewardship campaign every year. Westminster is not in business for its own survival. Our mission is to be part of God's answer to the brokenness of our world. You have heard today from the executive director of a ministry that brings God's compassion to people who are broken by brutal forces they cannot control. Contact Ministries cannot address every need, but this city would be much poorer if it did not exist. Without your practice of stewardship and Westminster's consistent support important ministries like this would be crippled. Learning to live by God's compassion means never losing heart in our ministry of serving others.

Reynolds Price is a scholar and writer who has described what it means to live by the compassion of God. In his book, *A Whole New Life*, Price writes about how devastating it was to learn that he had a terrible form of spinal cancer. He began to dream every night. The third night was the worst. This dream stated its point with brutal candor. He describes it in these words:

I was walking the seventy miles from Durham to Warren County, North Carolina—to find my birthplace ...When I found the house and searched the rooms, it proved abandoned and sadly empty; But once I was outside again in the dark, a small young black-haired man appeared like a cringing demon, writhing around me in a sinuous dance; then saying, "Now you must learn the bat dance." I suddenly knew that this bat dance was death...Still dreaming I summoned my strength to refuse him. Weeks later I'd preserve that third nightmare in a poem:

I will walk all night.

I will not die of concern.

Nothing will make me dance in that dark.

(Quoted by Mark Ramsey, *Journal For Preachers*, Pentecost 2010, page 13).

This experience taught Price how to depend on the compassion of God. At the end of his account of illness, pain, and near-death Price expresses amazement that he has not given up on God and that God has not given up on him. He continues to be astounded that even cancer, confinement in a wheelchair, and a death sentence prognosis has not caused him to lose heart.

As we participate in God's compassion we discover that we need never give in to the brutality of our world. By the power of God's grace, nothing will make us dance in that dark.