

Testimony: The Core of our Church Tested
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The United Church of Gainesville
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Luke 18:1-7 – The Widow and the Crooked Judge

From The Muslim sayings of Jesus, translated by Tarif Khalidi, #100

Christ passed by a group of people who hurled insults at him, and he responded with blessings. He passed by another group who insulted him, and he responded likewise. One of his disciples asked, "Why is it that the more they insult you, the more you bless them, as if inviting this upon yourself?" Christ said, "A person can bring forth only what is within him."

I have a curvature of the upper spine that has been increasing lately. My dad developed this condition as an adolescent, and his became extreme enough to be known back then as a hunchback. I never thought there was much I could do about it. Then, last June, Sandy suggested I ask my physician about physical therapy, which I didn't even know was an option. My doctor made a referral, and I began going to Balanced Body, which is a physical therapy center that uses Pilates in their work.

I didn't know anything about Pilates. The last time I did physical therapy, I actually gave myself a hernia while overdoing rehab from meniscus repair knee surgery. Thus to my surprise I discovered that Pilates is a very different kind of physical therapy that involves core postural muscles. It teaches an awareness of breath and balance to support the spine. It uses exercises and techniques unlike anything I have ever done. When I asked my physical therapist exactly what this core that she speaks of was, she showed me how the central muscles of my torso work to help my posture and balance. Quite frankly, I have a lot of work ahead of me to strengthen these muscles, find my sense of balance, and reverse the habits that have caused the deterioration in my back. Yet I'm excited. I'm hopeful. I love the possibilities of halting this deterioration.

I am going to come back to the issue of core strength later and relate it to this church and our faith, for I believe that the whole Quran burning incident pushed us back to the question of the core strength of this church.

Who are we as a church when the going gets tough? This is my testimony.

I begin with the story of the widow and the crooked judge from the gospel of Luke, a story I find at the core of my faith.

The Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, '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 by continually coming.'

This is a very strange story. Why does Jesus illustrate prayer with a story of begging justice from a crooked judge?

The widow is demanding justice against her opponent. It's likely that the widow is asking that the dowry she brought into her marriage be returned to her from her deceased husband's family. It may be common for a husband's brother to keep his widow's dowry in biblical times, but it is a morally questionable practice.

In biblical times, without this money, this woman is destitute. There is no safety net, no welfare system. To survive and feed her children she will have to become either a beggar or a prostitute. She could die. It is that serious.

There is no appealing to the judge's faith or sense of decency, because he has neither. The only power she has left is her persistence, and her persistence proves powerful. She wears down the judge, who out of sheer weariness gives her justice.

Still the question remains. What does this have to do with prayer and God?

Walter Wink, one of my favorite bible scholars, who did a workshop here at UCG about ten years ago, says one lesson of prayer in this parable is that without the widow's persistence, God could not have answered her prayer without violating her God given human freedom. God doesn't swoop into human life and grab steering wheels of careening cars or yank us back from dangerous precipices. This widow had to do something to make space for God to act.

There's a great joke about a guy who prays everyday to win the lottery. Finally God thunders at him, "Meet me half way – buy a ticket!" Knocking on the door is meeting God half way.

Prayer is a combination of opening ourselves to divine mystery and taking action. When one of you comes to my office feeling lost and powerless, damned if you do and damned if you don't, I often share this story of the persistent widow. I tell you to bang unmercifully on the door of whatever injustice you face so God may rain mercy into your life. I tell you that if you feel damned if you do and damned if you don't - then do.

When Terry Jones announced he was going to burn 100 copies of the Quran in our city, members of this congregation came to me and said, "What can we do?" I realized that in order for our prayer to have any effectiveness, we had to act. We had to bang on the door of that confused man.

Last summer at the "Ask the Pastor" sermon, one of you asked me how I deal with someone whose faith and sense of justice are in exact opposition to mine. I spoke then about understanding their perspectives, which in most cases is important. At the same time, however, there comes a moment when we are called in the words of the prophet Micah, "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Facing Terry Jones was that kind of moment.

We banged on his door like a Kansas hailstorm.

What struck me most deeply was how we at UCG found our core strength, that which gives the spine of this church its balance and breath. You have thanked me for my witness in this effort, but I did nothing alone. Our whole ministry, the core of this church prepared us for this moment. We have lived, breathed, and prayed compassion and inclusion for our entire history as a congregation. To "join together as a spiritual community to worship God, however known," as our compact calls us, is to be poised and ready to counter someone who wants to desecrate the sacredness of God known differently from his own narrow path.

The purpose of the church is to prepare us for moments when injustice challenges us so that we may be prepared to stand up and say, "Here I am Lord, send me."

When we realized that one way we could counter Terry Jones' plan to burn the Quran was to read it in our worship, we were ready to act. I knew I didn't have to ask the Board of Parish Ministry, nor the Church Council if it would be okay to read from the Quran. I knew that no one would storm out of this church if we read another's sacred scripture. We had already laid that foundation of open hearted faith.

As a result Al Jazeera, the world's largest Arab news service could film us singing "Let there be Peace on Earth" and broadcast this service of inclusion around the Arab world. As we let our light shine the world could see American Christians practicing a belief in a God who loves all people rather than just the bigotry of Terry Jones.

At the Hoda Islamic center here in Gainesville, one of their members reminded me that Muslims believe everything Jesus said, but not necessarily everything that was said about Jesus, which isn't too far from what we would say here as well.

In a collection of the Muslim sayings of Jesus is this story, "Christ passed by a group of people who hurled insults at him, and he responded with blessings. He passed by another group who insulted him, and he responded likewise. One of his disciples asked, 'Why is it that the more they insult you, the more you bless them, as if inviting this upon yourself?' Christ said, 'A person can bring forth only what is within him.'"

We have nurtured a welcoming faith in our hearts. Support of our Muslim sisters and brothers came naturally to us because as we brought forth that which was already within us.

One reporter after another asked me if I was hopeful that Terry Jones would not burn the Quran. I typically replied that I was always hopeful, but not optimistic. Remarkably, Terry Jones did not burn the Quran. I don't know whether he ultimately listened to his better angels or he was simply afraid for his life. It doesn't matter. Everyone from the General Petraeus, to President Obama, to the Pope, to you who along with 8,000 others signed the petition asking him to stop his intended Quran burning were knocking on his door demanding justice. It worked. Our hopes happened.

Which brings me to my last point.

Jesus' parables are metaphors of heaven on earth. They always come with a surprise, because heaven is full of surprises. Heaven is like a crooked judge listening to a persistent widow. Surprise! The purpose of the church is to embody glimpses of heaven on earth by living heavenly surprises.

Here's the surprise that came to me in writing this sermon. It's budget time. Our congregational meeting follows this service. We tend to think of the budget in terms of the different categories that we fund. We often think of salaries and operational costs as necessities. We think of the programs for children, youth and adults, as things we do for ourselves. And we think of outreach as what we do for others. All of this is true, to a point.

But there was new aha that came to me while working with Muslims, Jews, and other Christians in combating the Islamaphobia that was not only centered for a while in Gainesville but that is also rampant in our country. The radical inclusiveness of the faith of this church has also clearly been revealed as our outreach, our social justice through this trying season. I realized that everything we do, whether it is how we run our church school, youth groups and adult programs, how our building is used, how we pray, sing, and preach; how we support the interfaith hospitality network, how we feed the hungry is all part of one witness of wholeness to the world.

Worship is not only for us and volunteering for IHN is not only for others. Worship sends us out to welcome a world of diversity. Meeting our homeless guests from IHN fills our hearts with God's spirit. UCG is a church where inclusive faith witnesses to the world for wholeness. Our journey inward is part of our journey outward. Our preaching is action, our action is preaching.

Come to our congregational meeting today. Understand that our budget is not just unconnected categories divided up among salaries, utilities, music, children, youth and giving to others. When we give to this church we support the core strength of an integrated, unique dynamic witness. The faith that will save this world is the one that reaches across all that divides us rather than a zealotry that sets us one against the other. It is not tragic pride to say that this is the core faith that God has given us to live. This is the core strength to which we are all asked to pledge our money at a level that makes a difference.

Come to our congregational meeting today. And when the call to pledge comes, remember,

"We are travelers on a journey.

We are neighbors on the road.

We are here to help each other

Walk the mile and bear the load." (*Servant Song*, Richard Gillard)