

Emblems of Faithfulness – Luke 18:1-8

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There's been talk lately about whether our country is in the beginning of or on the verge of a religious revival. What would make us think that?

The steady decline of Christianity in America seems to have slowed, perhaps even paused. There's evidence that Gen Z men in particular are returning to church and younger generations of Americans are now attending church slightly more regularly than older generations.

It's been reported that students on college campuses seem to be more curious about faith than they were a few years ago.

A couple of years ago, I remember speaking in this space about the religious revival that occurred at Asbury University in Kentucky in 2023, where 50,000 people were drawn over several days in one of the country's first major spiritual revivals in decades.

And so, for people of faith like us, it's encouraging to see these signs of revival. A revival could be defined as, according to Russell Moore, editor of Christianity Today, "a concept with a long history in American evangelicalism, rooted in the Bible, that says a people who have grown cold and lifeless can be renewed in their faith. It is a kind of resurrection from the dead."

Indeed, revival has the effect of waking up those of us who have been dormant in our faith and spurring us to greater vitality, while also bringing non-believers to faith in Jesus, too.

And the thing about authentic and enduring revivals is that they are coupled with a sense of humility and repentance.

Tim Keller, the late pastor and author said of revivals: “Ordinary Christians aren’t usually sad enough *or* happy enough. We’re not convicted enough about our sin. We’re not experiencing deep repentance and therefore we don’t experience high assurance” — by which Keller meant the high assurance of God’s love.

That’s exactly the biblical model. Time after time in scripture, revival and renewal begins with repentance. In the Book of Acts, when Peter spoke to a crowd in Jerusalem about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, listeners were “cut to the heart” and cried out to Peter and the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

In the Old Testament, when a king of ancient Judah, Josiah, heard the book of the law for the first time, “he tore his robes” in grief.

When Jonah called on the people of ancient Nineveh to repent, scripture records that the people of the city declared a fast and put on sackcloth, a sign of mourning for their sin.

In other words, revival begins with the people proclaiming, by word and deed, “I have sinned.”

The first prayer that we pray here in worship every Sunday isn’t a prayer of praise or thanksgiving. It’s a prayer of confession, where he humbly acknowledge our mistakes and pledge to turn and go in the direction of greater faithfulness.

Repentance is a marker, or an emblem, of our faith.

We could all make our list of emblems that identify us as part of the Christian community. Repentance should be one of them. Another might be generosity.

The people of God are a grateful people. We’re grateful because of what God has done in Jesus Christ—became one of us

to teach us what it means to bring in the kingdom of God, what it means to love our neighbor, what it means to sacrifice. And God in Jesus Christ has forgiven us of our sin and promised life everlasting for all who believe.

And whenever somebody gives us a gift like that, we're compelled to be generous with what we have. We say thank you but we also show our gratitude by being generous with our time, our talents, and our treasure.

Next week, we will begin a time of focused attention on generosity as we make our way to Stewardship Sunday on November 9. "Make a Joyful Noise" is our theme. We make joyful noise in a whole host of ways that signify our gratitude to God. Being generous, another of the great emblems of our faith, deserves some of this specific attention during this fall season of harvest.

And then we come to that emblem of faithfulness that is demonstrated in this parable Jesus tells in Luke 18. It's a lesson about persistence.

The widow in the story he tells has been treated unjustly by the judge she requests justice from against her accuser. We don't know what she's seeking justice for. The details are left out. But she repeatedly asks the judge for it. She annoys him with her over-and-over requests that he finally relents and gives it to her.

In almost every way, this woman was powerless. The unnamed widow here likely represents someone without the political and economic clout the judge can wield. Her power instead is her persistence. Because the widow won't relent, the judge does and grants her what she seeks.

She had a persistent faith—enough so that it persisted in seeking life among the unjust systems of the day.

Perhaps this is precisely the kind of faith Jesus wonders if he will find one day on his return (verse 8)—a faith that demands justice in a world coursing with injustice, a faith that persists in seeking life even in systems seemingly ruled by the forces of death, a faith that looks to God’s promises as if they will be fulfilled today.

In so many ways, life puts up roadblocks to our thriving. We encounter numerous setbacks and sufferings that it’s easy to give up at times. But this widow in the story demonstrates that, even against long odds, we persist in being faithful to the God who made us and has the capacity to restore us.

How about a football analogy? When a team gets the ball back behind by four points with 36 seconds left in the fourth quarter and has the football at its own 6 yard line, the odds of it going the length of the field and scoring a touchdown to win the game are remote. But that doesn’t mean they concede defeat and don’t take the field to try and win the game. They persist in their quest for victory.

The odds against this woman finding justice for herself, too, were remote. Yet she persisted in seeking it out for herself from this judge. And due to her persistence, she found it.

Being persistent is like keeping a dream alive. The theologian Howard Thurman wrote on this. He said:

It is a part of the pretensions of modern life to traffic in what is generally called “realism.” There is much insistence on being practical, down to earth. Such things as dreams are wont to be regarded as romantic or as a badge of insecurity, or as escape hatches for the human spirit. ... [We] cannot continue long to live if the dream in the heart has perished. It is then that [we] stop hoping, stop looking, and the last embers of their anticipations fade away.

The dream in the heart is the outlet. It is one with the living water welling up from the very springs of Being, nourishing and sustaining all of life. Where there is no dream, the life becomes a swamp, a dreary dead place, and, deep within, a [person's] heart begins to rot. The dream need not be some great and overwhelming plan; it need not be a dramatic picture of what might or must be someday. ... Such may be important for some. ... But it is not in these grand ways that the dream nourishes life. The dream is the quiet persistence in the heart that enables [us] to ride out the storms of ... churning experiences. It is the exciting whisper moving through the aisles of [the] spirit answering the monotony of limitless days of dull routine. It is the ever-recurring melody in the midst of the broken harmony and harsh discords of human conflict. It is the touch of significance which highlights the ordinary experience, the common event. The dream is no outward thing. It does not take its rise from the environment in which one moves or functions. It lives in the inward parts, it is deep within, where the issues of life and death are ultimately determined. Keep alive the dream; for as long as [we have] a dream in [our] heart, [we] cannot lose the significance of living.

The widow must have had a dream. And so do we: That God's will be done and the kingdom of God be realized.

People who are faithful keep on being faithful—in our prayers, in our repentance, and in our generosity. And to persist is to believe in the cause our persistence is attached to. It's keeping going despite what the world tells us. In a sense, it's holding on to a dream for what God can make reality. That is truly emblematic of our faith.