

## Do Not Lose Heart

Luke 18:1-8, Jeremiah 31:31-34

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, October 20, 2019*

Greta Thunberg gave a Ted Talk in her native Sweden in August of 2018. She was fifteen. Greta started her talk by recalling the first time she consciously heard people speak of a climate crisis created by our human way of living. She was eight years old and her parents urged her to turn off lights and recycle paper. She noticed that a few scientist were speaking of a crisis that was threatening our existence but it did not seem to effect common discourse or behavior. She said that “did not add up” for her. She took the climate crisis seriously.

At age 11, Greta became deeply depressed and stopped talking and eating. She has since been diagnosed with Aspergers (highly functioning on the autism spectrum), OCD, and selective mutism. Greta says that people like her see the world more in black and white, don't like lying, and are not into social games. As far as dealing with the climate crisis, Greta said, autistic people feel more normal to her than the general population which seems to go on with life as usual when there is nothing usual about it. She also said that she only talks when she knows she really has something to say and now is the time.

Greta can talk all the relevant numbers and science facts about our climate crisis. She can eloquently make the case that even the aim to stay within the 2% limit of a rise in temperatures, as agreed upon in the Paris agreement, is not ambitious enough. She points to the fact that up to 200 species are going extinct per day. We notice this also in a loss of birds and insects right here already. Germany has lost 75% of its insects! The loss of pollinators will be especially disastrous for our ecosystems. We are witnessing how more and more people are living in areas facing droughts or devastating floods.<sup>1</sup>

And still, Greta says, too many people in the world are not aware enough [or are flat out denying that there is a problem]. Those who are aware are not doing enough to create change.

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<sup>1</sup> Many Greta also highlights the need for industrial nations to do the lion share of the change to allow poorer countries to build needed infrastructure before they can be expected to also take a more active role in addressing climate change.

That includes all of us. Greta brought this home powerfully in her talk when she projected her own life's story out to 2078. That year will hopefully mark her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. She pondered having her children and grandchildren there to spend the day with her. She wondered what life would be like and what younger generations would ask her about the people who lived in 2018. She imagined how her grandchildren would ask why people did not change things when they still could. How many of us who are now this age are already hearing this from our grandchildren?

Greta has had enough. In August of 2018, Greta started school climate strikes in front of Parliament in Stockholm. Other young people have followed her lead around the world. In response, numerous adults have told her that she should be in school, become a climate scientist and help solve the problem. When people respond this way, she often points out that the very scientists our schools have already produced are giving us the data, possible solutions, and are still being ignored. Greta doesn't want to settle for listing some of the hopeful technologies lest we get lost in complacency. As far as Greta is concerned, we need to stop playing by unsustainable rules and take bolder action. Her hope arises from concrete action to protect the future of this planet.

Greta is not giving up. She will step on our toes day after day. She spoke at the recent UN Assembly on Climate change just a few weeks ago. After President Trump waltzed right in front of her to address the assembly unannounced and on his own schedule, Greta could barely contain her frustration. Trump had no intention of addressing a climate crisis. Many of you have heard what Greta had to say that day when she was finally allowed to speak:

*"I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us for hope. How dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. There will not be any solution or plans in line with these figures here today because these numbers are too uncomfortable and you're not mature enough to tell it like it is. You are failing us. The young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say, we will never forgive you. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up and change is coming whether you like it or not."*

How do you respond to her forceful words? Do you feel touched? Embarrassed? Convicted? Annoyed? Overwhelmed? ... Sadly, some commentators have shifted the focus away from Greta's prophetic message to her as a person. She has been dismissed as mentally ill and deranged in her anger. Some have even referred to her as a child who is being exploited by brainwashers. Some have said that her braided hair makes Greta look like one of those Nazi Hitler youth girls who were brainwashed to proclaim false propaganda in the 1930s and 40s. As someone whose parents grew up in the Hitler youth, I venture to say that nothing could be further from the truth to explain who Greta Thunberg is and what she has to say to us!

It seems that we will go to any length to discredit, dismiss and demean someone who holds up an uncomfortable mirror for us. Maybe it takes someone with Asperger syndrome to have the nerve to call us out on our complacency and ignorance, to relentlessly add 2 and 2 together. Ask people in the growing Saharan desert, on islands in the ocean, etc. or those whose harvest are getting wiped out in the Midwest, those whose homes have been destroyed by fires in California if she has a point. Let us also keep in mind that the Gulf of Maine is warming at an alarming rate.

When I think of Greta and the many brave young climate activists, I think of the story of the widow and the unjust judge from our Gospel story for today. In Jesus' time, widows and orphans were usually denied a voice in their community. Greta is not a widow but she represents a generation that in some ways feels orphaned or abandoned by adults – but let me return to the widow for now. Widows were dependent on a man in the extended family to care for them or they were reduced to begging and life on the streets. The widow in our story would likely not have had friends in high places who could pull weight and get someone in a position of power to plead her case or get favors for her. Nobody stood up for her. All she had was her determination and faith to get justice after being wronged - for what exactly we do not know. Over and over again, she went directly to the judge who held court in public at the gates of the city. We can even imagine her coming after him while he was going about his business on the streets of the town, at a shop, perhaps on the way to synagogue. She would not let him be.

It was the judge's responsibility to protect the most vulnerable, including widows, orphans and aliens. They are named as persons of "special interest" to God (Psalm 68:5, 146:9). Instead of protecting them, this man is known as one who "neither feared God nor had respect for people (Luke 18:2.4)." It is the widow's sheer persistence that is getting on his nerves enough for him to act on her behalf. "I will grant her justice, so that she does not wear me out by continually coming (Luke 18:6)," says the judge. He doesn't care for her concerns. He just wants her out of his hair, out of his life, and as far away from his public court as possible.

Characters like the judge are a foil for us and the early Christians who also heard these stories. The judge is not likened to God but used as a contrast to how God responds to our situation and need. If the widow got the unjust judge to help her, how much more could she trust that God who is just and steadfast is with her. By analogy, how much more could the early Christians trust that God would not forsake them no matter what opposition or persecution or injustice they faced or witnessed in their time.

It is sometimes hard for us to appreciate the sense of urgency of this widow or of Greta because our lives often feel comfortable enough to not recognize how some of the issues facing us are truly a matter of life and death. Or other important issues are taking up our energy. It also seems to me that the issues that require waking up exceed climate issues. Let us also remember the students and parents calling out for change in the aftermath of gun violence. It includes families mourning the death of a loved one due to addiction to opioids. [Think also of Kurdish people in Northern Syria, the Rohingyas, the Muslim Uighurs in China, Native Americans who have cried out for justice for ages, families in Mexico still trying to find out what happened to their children who were abducted years ago...].

Just prior to our passage from Luke and following it, Jesus is calling people to wake up, to address inaction, and become aware of self-righteousness. Jesus call us to a deeper and more honest humility (Pharisee and tax collector in Luke 18:9-14) about the suffering that results from our ignorance.<sup>2</sup> We hear the sense of urgency in Luke 17:33: "Those who try to make their

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<sup>2</sup> Beverly R. Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching: Year C* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 1994) 564.

life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it (LK 17:33).” These words are also apt for dealing with climate change if we want to give future generations a chance of living sustainable lives. It requires dying to our unsustainable ways of life.

Where is God in all this? We don’t always see justice delivered swiftly as is implied in our text, at least not overtly. The Mystics say that God does not necessarily protect us from trouble. God does sustain us inexplicably in the midst of it as we rise up and witness to the complexities of truth. To the degree that we ourselves are the culprits, it seems that God does not simply force things on us but allows the discomfort of our situation to actually change us. In Jesus, the Christ, God enters our world to be with us amidst the struggle and suffering.

We are still struggling to heed the Holy Spirit’s guidance on sustainably caring for creation and must not be content to merely point the finger at others as our roadblocks. Will we look at our own choices, also as a community of faith? [Please note that we will make creation care a focus of our Lenten study]. Will we dare to ask where and how we might be acting as the unjust judge? It seems to me that God is coming to us through people like Greta, calling us to a deeper faithfulness, however painful their truth telling may be. In our text, Jesus calls on us not to lose heart but to pray always. Let us pray that the Spirit will convict and transform us until God’s love is finally written on our hearts, as Jeremiah wrote, and shapes our actions with conviction and humility for the sake of all creation. May God find faith on earth.