

Challenges of Small Voices

Genesis 32: 22-31 Luke 18: 1-8

Greta Thunberg says she first heard about climate change in 2011, when she was 8 years old, and could not understand why so little was being done about it. Three years later she became depressed, lethargic, and stopped talking as well as eating, and eventually was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and selective mutism. While acknowledging that her diagnosis "has limited me before", she does not view her Asperger's as an illness and has instead called it her "superpower". She said: "I was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, OCD and selective mutism. That basically means I only speak when I think it's necessary. Now is one of those moments."

Thunberg said she first got the idea of a climate strike after school shootings in the United States in February 2018 led to several youths refusing to go back to school. These teen activists at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, went on to organize "March for Our Lives" in support of greater gun control.

On August 20, 2018, Thunberg, who had just started ninth grade, decided not to attend school until the 2018 Swedish general election on September 9. Her protest began after the heat waves and wildfires during Sweden's hottest summer in at least 262 years. Her demands were that the Swedish government reduce carbon emissions in accordance with the Paris Agreement, and she protested by sitting outside the Riksdag every day for three weeks during school hours with the sign "Skolstrejk för klimatet" (school strike for the climate). She also handed out leaflets that stated: "I am doing this because you adults are ~~shitting~~ [pooping] on my future."

After the general elections, Thunberg continued to strike only on Fridays, still inspiring school students across the globe to take part in student strikes. As of December 2018, more than 20,000 students had held strikes in at least 270 cities. The school strikes for climate on September 20 and 27, 2019 were attended by over 4 million people, according to one of the co-organizers.

Of course, she attended the UN Climate Action Summit in New York last month and had stinging words for the world leaders there. "This is all wrong. I shouldn't be standing here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to me for hope? *How dare you!* You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!" (most of the above from Wikipedia)

A host of world leaders have reacted to this somewhat awkward and brutally straightforward teenager. They have treated her dismissively, as if she deserved a pat on the head and should go away now. One said that she failed to understand the

complexities of global climate change and is dividing and antagonizing people. Other influential people have cited her as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.

A young teenager who has some compelling disabilities might be inclined to sit in the back of the class and simply get through high school. I know that's what I would have done at that age. Okay, that's what I *did*.

Today's youth are facing challenges that we never faced as kids. Mention was already made of the students of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School from whom Thunberg got the idea of a school strike. It was clear that adults who were supposed to be responsible and deal with urgent problems were neither being responsible nor dealing with problems. Their frustration at adults who wring their hands, utter meaningless routine lines like offering "thoughts and prayers" after each school shooting, and then do nothing, has peaked. The small voices of those who are being victimized by adult neglect are done waiting for adults to act. They have become activists and advocates, young prophets for our own time.

Their empowerment is the result of our failure as an adult society to do even the most commonsense things. The students are right; it is inexcusable. They are making a witness of faith, faith in their own ability to campaign for and have a say in their future, and faith abiding that adults will get it together and do what they have been unable and unwilling to do to date. Faith is empowerment to act beyond your prescribed, routine abilities, to take the bull by the horns and make progress toward the goal of a better life, better society, and better world.

Faith is more than a nice idea, more than a stance or a position or a chosen belief. Faith is more than a routine or a ritual. Faith is a challenge that demands a rigorous journey in personal development and social experience in pursuit of things that may seem like they'll never come about, doing things that seem like they'll never succeed, and pushing continuously in efforts that seem vague, pointless, and just plain crazy in many ways. Yet people of faith repeat the sequence time after time, always unsure if the impact is going to achieve what's needed, with success hardly ever being recorded, and the daunting tasks stacked up ahead like a waiting road block. And this scenario gets played out in scripture more often than we'd care to admit.

Listen for the little people and pay attention to the small voices that challenge and change the course. Let's see how the relentless nature of faith gets played out in two accounts.

Our first scripture in Genesis tells of Jacob's wrestling match at the Jabbok River. Jacob's brother Esau is known to be a day's journey away, but he's coming with hundreds of men. You'll recall that the relationship between Jacob and Esau in their younger years was a complete and total mess, for which most would blame Jacob as the great manipulator. Now with Esau and a horde of men approaching, the situation seemed quite ominous. Jacob sent his family across the river to safety. Alone at night, perhaps in a dream, a visitor comes, a mystery opponent. We don't know how it started but there's a fight. They struggle, wrestling all night.

It was an exhausting contest. The strange visitor could not overcome Jacob to gain the upper hand. The stranger injured Jacob in what should have been a winning move. Unbowed and in pain, Jacob stubbornly and relentlessly held on as time turned to his favor.

The stranger had to leave; daybreak was coming. We don't know why, but events delivered the advantage to Jacob, having persevered over a night's laborious struggle. Jacob now demanded a blessing from his foe. Jacob's blessings earlier in his life came by conniving and deceit. Here Jacob had to work long and hard, aggressively striving toward a goal. No clever tricks or sneaky gimmicks would work. His relentless determination and his powerful spirit earned him a new name from his opponent, a new identity and a new promise for his life in the stranger's blessing.

As the stranger mysteriously came upon Jacob, so he departs. Jacob has his blessing, but Jacob's question—“What is *your* name?” – goes unanswered as the stranger leaves and takes his name with him.

As with Jacob, God **confronts** us as much as **invites** us to join the struggle. We may think we're too small, inadequate, or insignificant for the task, and others may be dismissive of our ambitions. The faithful who respond need to grow their spiritual stamina as much physical stamina. It is hard work – demanding in both physical and spiritual aspects. Jacob is left with a limp for the rest of his life, a reminder of his stubborn persistence, but also of the difficult costs to be borne by those who pursue the sacred challenge of the Kingdom.

God is gracious, providing for our needs and showering his children with blessings. But the work of God and his Kingdom, the work that matters, that's a formidable test. Were it not, we'd have achieved God's Kingdom on earth long ago. Dogged persistence and relentless faith is key to doing the work of the Kingdom.

Jesus tells what our pew Bible calls, “The Parable of the Persistent Widow.” That's a nice way of putting it. She is a cranky pain in the tush. She is the lady who argues over the price of a tomato and will hold up the line until she gets every penny. She is the woman who is using last week's circular and demands that the store honor the expired price, and she won't give up until she gets the discount. She is the middle schooler who hasn't done any work in the first half hour of a 45 minute class, but who has asked to go to the bathroom seven times. You know this person; the relentless one who will, at any cost, work relentlessly to get what is desired regardless of whether it's deserved or not.

In the story that Jesus tells, the woman wants justice and she hasn't heard justice from the town judge. She continually badgers the judge to get satisfaction and she has no inclination to stop.

Now this judge is said to be ‘neither fearing God nor caring about men.’ What scripture is really saying here is that, in not so many words, “he's a jerk; he's a bum.”

He's rather incompetent and self-centered, clueless and indifferent about the nature and quality of justice. He treasures his own opinion and takes the counsel of no one. He summarily dismissed this woman and her complaint. He's done with her, he thinks. She is just one of those annoying little people.

Not so fast. She's determined to get justice. We can imagine, day after day, the judge is accosted by this widow. On and on it goes until finally, the judge can't stand her nagging and complaining, and he gives her what she wants just to get rid of her. The thought of actually being **just** still hasn't entered his mind. No, he just wants her to go away and leave him alone. By her perseverance, the widow who was dismissed as an irrelevant little person prevails and gains what she sought.

Jesus contrasts this story of a widow's hard-won gains from a useless judge with the **willingness** of a loving God to provide for his faithful. Knowing the uphill struggles and difficult situations sure to confront and challenge his disciples, Jesus shares how God is willing to bless faithful efforts. For those who respond faithfully and determinedly to the work of the Lord's mission, God's blessing will surely follow, "and quickly" adds Jesus.

Jesus' lesson ends by asking, *But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?* God is ready to bless our dedicated efforts, but if there's no faithfulness to the Lord's ministry and mission, a dedication to attain the promised blessing, then you can't expect greater blessings to come. They're only hard-won by determined disciples, as shown by Jacob and by the widow. They may indeed be little people with small voices who are of no consequence to the world, but their committed faithfulness placed into action has amazing impact and reaps blessings unforeseen.

Such blessings await each one who has the faith and spirit to engage the Lord's endeavor and seek the favored blessing. But the Lord also knows that few will make that substantial commitment, building the spiritual stamina for a relentless pursuit, and discover what God has for them.

The basic work of the church is that continuous, unending struggle for higher blessings derived from our faithfulness. That even applies to little churches like ours and our small voices. That's why we're together as a church, not as social gathering or a learned society or a dining club. God pulls us together to be active, energetic and vital witnesses to his way in Jesus Christ. That's because there are blessings to be uncovered, promises seeking fulfillment, and treasures awaiting discovery by diligent, obedient servants of the Lord.