

## No Guarantees: The Uncertainty Of Faith – Hannah Marshall

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Americans have a tendency to view the world as their oyster. That if you work hard enough, you can accomplish anything. That “faith” means self-confidence, a trust that God or the universe is looking out for you, and that if you have this “faith,” your life is going to work out just great. Politician Brad Henry encapsulated the sentiment nicely when he said, “Believe in yourself, and the rest will fall into place. Have faith in your own abilities, work hard, and there is nothing you cannot accomplish.” Ben Carson has a similar quote, but the faith is not in oneself alone but also in God: “Through hard work, perseverance and a faith in God, you can live your dreams.” That sounds a lot like the oft-quoted televangelist, Joel Osteen, who said, “I believe if you keep your faith, you keep your trust, you keep the right attitude, if you're grateful, you'll see God open up new doors.”

Have a can-do attitude. Work your way to the top. Be successful.

Here's another quote for you. One written by a woman who suffered from lupus, which caused severe fatigue and joint pain, who kept faith her whole life and saw outstanding success in her career while struggling against the odds. But she wasn't so self-assured as the politicians and preachers I just quoted. She prayed for healing but died of surgery complications at age 39. Flannery O'Connor wrote this to a friend: “You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty.”

We so want to believe that faith will clear things up for us. Wouldn't it be nice if we could understand the rules? If we could just believe a little harder, accept another altar call, and be safe from the tragedies of life? Wouldn't it be nice if we could do anything we set our minds to? If we could pray in faith and find an end to pain? Maybe if we prayed the psalm this morning with enough faith, God will fix the tumult in our own lives. Maybe God will punish the people who've hurt us. Maybe, finally, there will be justice.

But the pain just keeps on coming.

Protesters in Hong Kong who just want fair treatment and democracy are being assaulted, sprayed with tear gas and permanent ink to mark them as dissenters and make it easier to arrest them in future.

The UN Refugee Agency reports that each day, 37,000 people are forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution.

*My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.*

The pollution of our planet is evident in rising temperatures, ocean acidification, and a growing number of extreme weather events—which will lead to an uninhabitable earth if we can't find a way to drastically reduce our carbon emissions.

Constant natural disasters continue to kill and displace people worldwide. In the Bahamas, over a thousand people are still missing after Hurricane Dorian.

*The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.*

In the US, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth are twice as likely as their peers to experience physical assault.

More than one in four trans people has faced a bias-driven assault, and rates are higher for trans women and trans people of color.

*For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.*

I fear for my own small living here in Greenville. I question our future; I worry about the health of my daughter and husband. I wonder if I'm doing enough, if I'm faithful enough, to do anything to slow the destruction and entropy and fear-mongering and selfishness that swirl around me.

*Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?*

What is left for faith? The psalmist cries out to God for help and salvation. Paul urges *that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone*. Do I have the heart to keep praying? I am in lament with Jeremiah: *O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!*

I am often in lament. In our world of information, I can pull statistics like the ones above with a quick Google search. I can know so much of the pain of this world and remain fairly small and helpless to do anything about it. But even when I just think of my own small circle of experience, I feel completely powerless there, too.

And it's okay to lament. We mourn because trust is broken, love is lost, and people die. We mourn because God feels distant and everything looks broken. We mourn for the weakness and sickness of our small and fragile bodies. Even in prosperity, we mourn for those who are crushed under the wheels of our own success. Chaos and pain and sin. We lament, as we should.

But it's not enough for me to sit alone in darkness. I remain there for a time, but if I'm being thoughtful, my lament must end and action must begin. But what action is worth taking?

I'm a planner and an organizer. When I come up against a problem, I want to fix it immediately. If a light bulb goes out in our house, I must replace it right away. If I don't know how to fix the faulty wall outlet or how to create a certain type of Excel spreadsheet, I must find the appropriate YouTube video and conquer the problem as soon as possible. But how do I plan for next year without all the data? How do I help heal hurting communities without a how-to YouTube video? How do we organize a future in which we're staring straight into fog?

Martin Luther, who struggled with the darkness in his own life, said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” Faith isn’t knowing that everything will turn out all right. It isn’t even hoping that everything will turn out all right. It’s planting the tree despite the fact that everything might go to hell tomorrow anyway.

We plan. We hope. We have faith. This is the parable Jesus offers us today: not happiness or success. Not even answers or a list of fool-proof rules. Just faithfulness.

There is nothing like the parable from Luke this morning to convince us that Jesus lived in the same world we do—one where money is king, even within circles of faith. The rich man in this parable is unjust and unforgiving. These are the qualities that allow him to charge exorbitant rent to tenants who can’t possibly afford it, and then “graciously” offer them loans which they will never be able to pay off. For these tenants, life has become a financial prison in which they will never escape the debt they owe the rich man.

Who acts this way today? Well, it’s a common enough strategy, isn’t it? The business and finance worlds can be full of scandal, but we don’t get off without taint, either. We benefit from the dishonesty and exorbitant fees, too. For example, high credit card interest fees trap the poor in deeper and deeper debt, while the credit card users who can afford to pay off their balances every month benefit through rewards programs.

And the manager in Jesus’ parable? He’s been living it up with his position of trust from the rich man, spending money which doesn’t belong to him. The rich man has started to take notice of the skimming off the top, the not-quite-balanced books, the bits of expenditure squandered on the manager’s desires rather than on what benefits the rich man’s assets. And this rich man is not forgiving. He is uninterested in giving the manager a chance to redeem himself and fires him the first chance he gets.

What can the manager do now? His status is in serious jeopardy. He doesn’t want to have to take a menial job that he considers below him, but his reputation is completely ruined. So he puts his conniving mind to work and comes up with a plan to reduce the debts of all the rich man’s tenants.

Essentially, he becomes a savior of these debtors—and because he does it in the name of the rich man, the rich man becomes a savior, too. The manager gives the debtors a fighting chance at escape from the prison the rich man has wound so securely around them. And the rich man is left then to either go along with the scheme which has made him the hero or out the manager and look like the villain. He chooses hero. “You are some clever cheat,” he says to the manager. “You play the game pretty well, I’ve gotta hand it to you.”

This is the story Jesus tells. It’s a messed up world Jesus inhabited—as full of selfishness and deceit as Wall Street or the White House. But what’s the point of this story? Are we supposed to be like the manager? And what does that mean?

As a writer, I tend to not want to over-explicate any story. I think the truth of a parable lies in the nuance of its narrative form, and any bullet-pointed list is going to lack the truth that the whole

story lends.

But Luke seems uncomfortable letting the parable hang there without further explanation. He follows the parable with these words of Jesus': *Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?* I think it likely that Jesus—and Luke—had no love for a rich man who became rich by exploiting those who worked for him. I think Jesus appreciated the sense of irony, here: the unjust, unforgiving rich man is outsmarted by his conniving protégé.

The moral of the story—be faithful in little so that you may be worthy to be faithful in much—doesn't apply to how the rich man or the manager acts, except if we view this story with that ironic, humorous slant. In a way, the manager is very faithful—but only to his own interests. Both he and the rich man come out smelling like roses, but we know they're dirty players. Who benefits the most in this story? Arguably, the tenants who were buried in debt.

I like the way Eugene Peterson translates verses 8 and 9 in *The Message*: “Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

So, do we have to follow all the rules? Is that what being faithful looks like? Not in this parable. It's looking for the angle—how can we use the positions we have to benefit those below us on the social and financial ladders we're all so eager to climb? Who can we pressure to do the right thing, who can we cheat out of dishonest gains?

“Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty.” There is never any guarantee that life tomorrow will continue the way life has gone today. And the rich man may find you out. But be brave. Risk it all on a big scheme. Save this fatigued and over-extended planet one myopic step at a time. Don't let anyone—no matter their hold over you—convince you to turn away the other, the debtor, the queer, the foreigner, the non-Christian.

Making our way in this messed up world will often lead to lament, but if we hold to faith, then maybe, just maybe, we'll find creative survival. Or maybe the apple trees we plant will bear fruit for someone else down the road. One thing is sure, though: Jesus invites us into his holy, scheming, ironic, and undeserved forgiveness—so if, by any means, you can ease the debts of the worldly insignificant (but eternally essential) people around you, then make your way, however dark that way may seem.