

“Faithful Persistence”

Luke 18:1-8, Genesis 32:24-31, Psalm 121, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

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A lady at the end of a retreat met with her spiritual director. Frustrated she asked, “Why has my time here yielded no fruit?” “Perhaps,” the spiritual director replied, “because you have lacked the persistence to shake the tree.”

A theme of persistence runs through all of our scriptures today. Webster defines persistence as “the quality that allows someone to continue doing something or trying to do something even though it is difficult or opposed by other people.”

Jesus told the disciples of the glory of the Kingdom of God that was breaking into this world and the glory of the Kingdom of God that will come and be fully enjoyed. Jesus demonstrated the majesty of the Kingdom of God by healing people body, mind and soul, calming storms, and feeding thousands. The disciples saw the grandeur of the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus at baptism; the brilliance of Jesus’ transfiguration; Jesus’ joy in playing with children; and Jesus’ delight in helping, eating, and being with the outcast. Jesus even brought Lazarus back to life from the dead. For three years the disciples witnessed continuous miracles, Jesus bringing the Kingdom of God right into their midst. The disciples were excited; however, their lives were a mess, the world was a mess, and everywhere they looked there was sorrow and hardship. There was still so much to do, so much darkness that needed to be overcome with God’s light. The disciples were discouraged. Jesus told them again about the coming Kingdom of God; yet, the disciples were still discouraged. Jesus knowing their thoughts and feelings addressed their discouragement.

Luke explains. **Luke 18:1-8 NRSV** “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. Jesus 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 the judge 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.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to God’s chosen ones who cry to God day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you,

God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will God find faith on earth?"

We call this teaching the parable of the persistent widow. It gives us a sharp contrast between a grumpy, selfish judge and God who is gracious, joyful, and eager to fill the world and our lives with the blessings of the Kingdom of God. It addresses the disciples' discouragement head on. Jesus does not sugar coat the situation. Yes, there are aspects of the world, of people, of yourself, that are fallen, selfish, ugly and dark represented by the judge; yet, all of it will be overcome, in time, sometimes with a lot of persistence on our part with the Kingdom of God.

Luke prefaces the parable by saying we are to pray always and not to lose heart. The prayers of the widow included plenty of persistent action. The widow kept coming again and again to the judge. Whenever the judge took a break, ate a meal, watched a game there was the widow asking the judge to do his job that he grants justice.

The power imbalance is extreme: an appointed judge with an abundance of luxury, power, money and authority; and the widow vulnerable, alone, poor, homeless.

What was behind the widow's persistent prayer? Perhaps an experience of God, at some point she felt God's love, believed God's promises, imagined the Kingdom of God. Perhaps she trusted that the Kingdom of God will be enjoyed by her. Perhaps the widow realized that she was a beloved, cherished child of God who would inherit the blessings of being a part of God's family not because she had earned them or deserved them, rather a free gift flowing from God's grace. Perhaps there was more or something else. All we know for certain is the widow perceived the Kingdom of God and persisted in prayer until she could live a little more of it on earth.

One aspect of this parable is that we are the persistent widow praying, serving, loving into the world the grandeur of the Kingdom of God. Where there is need, injustice, strife no matter the magnitude of the need and the sparseness of our resources, we are to never lose heart for our prayerful persistent action will establish the Kingdom of God. Teresa of Avila said, "If you want to see the healing hands of God, look at your own. God partners with us to fill the world with blessings." Pastor Oehmig says, "the only way to err in prayer is not to do it."

Another aspect of this parable is we are both the persistent widow and the selfish, unjust judge. Pastor Oehmig believes, "the aim of true prayer is to wear down the unjust judge within ourselves, so that in us whatever is wrong may be made right by God's grace." How are you an unjust judge to yourself? Are you persistent in prayer with love when the judge within you wants to put yourself down, wants revenge, to hate? Are you persistent in prayer with joy when the judge within you wants to be lethargic, dreary, a pessimist, sad? Are you persistent

in prayer with grace when the judge declares you to be unworthy, a sinner, and a person of little value? Conversely are you persistent in prayer with humility when the judge declares you are entitled, sinless and better than average? Are you persistent in prayer with hope when the judge within you urges you to be discouraged, bitter, overwhelmed? Are you persistent in prayer with peace when the judge urges you to be anxious, afraid, nervous, and hostile? Are you persistent in prayer with compassion when the judge within you urges you to be indifferent? Are you persistent in prayer with purpose when the judge wants you to be lazy? Conversely are you persistent in prayer with rest when the judge wants to define you by your work? How does the unjust judge within you diminish you? Are you being persistent in prayer to overcome it?"

The unjust judge within us can create a confusing haze making life arduous. Persistent prayer opens up a gate, a way, a path for the blessings of the Kingdom of God to set us free. Sister Wendy Beckett wrote. "Who can ever understand the meaning of events that make up our conscious experience—in relationships, in business, or whatever? But the swirls of events are the context wherein is held the gate. It is a real but shadowy presence, a way through, a possibility. If we allow silence to open up within, we shall see the gate and be free to open it." Who guides the majority of your thoughts and feelings the persistent widow or the unjust judge? A purpose of prayer is to wear out the judge within us.

Another aspect of this parable is God is the persistent widow, and we are the judge. God certainly is sovereign, all powerful, all wise, all loving and capable of doing everything and anything. Yet, God loves each of us so much that God does not force God's will upon us therefore out of love for us God becomes almost powerless. God is persistent with us at all times, encouraging us to love, carrying our burdens, healing our wounds. God is persistent in molding us into more and more beautiful people. Even when we are unjust, selfish, and disrespectful of God and others, God remains the persistent widow loving us into better people. God is working everywhere in everyone pushing, pulling, prodding, enlightening, moving us to shalom.

One of my assignments at seminary was to identify five theological rocks. Five foundational beliefs that I passionately believe are true. One of those rocks is prayer. I believe prayer is the primary way God transforms me. Prayer is the way God morphs those who are praying. Persistent prayer is not so much about getting what we want from God as much as it is about God ushering in the kingdom of God through and within us. Persistent prayer shapes us into encouraged disciples. Synthesis newsletter states, "The purpose and result of persistent prayer is not to change God's mind. Rather, persistence in prayer is an expression of deep faith that allows the ongoing presence of God to have power over our lives."

Three aspects of the parable of the persistent widow. First, we are the persistent widow praying, serving, loving into the world the grandeur of the Kingdom of God. Second we are the persistent widow praying to wear out the judge within us. Third God is the persistent widow praying, transforming us the judge. Our next three scriptures have all three of these aspects within them. Listen to the persistent, prayerful invitation of God through each scripture.

Jacob was overwhelmed with guilt over the horrible things he did to his brother. Jacob was overwhelmed with fear that his brother would seek revenge and kill him. Yet Jacob arranged to meet his brother in the morning and ask for forgiveness. **Genesis 32:24-31 NRSV**“Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.” That day Jacob and Esau made peace, embraced and rejoiced.

The psalmist sings. **Psalm 121:1-8 NRSV** “I lift up my eyes to the hills--from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. God will not let your foot be moved; God who keeps you will not slumber. God who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; God will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy and us. **2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 NRSV** “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and God's kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or

unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”

It would have been easy for Jacob to flee, the psalmist to be overwhelmed, and Timothy to give up. Instead they all were persistent in prayer believing in the power of God to transform them and others. They were persistent in prayer changing situations, others, and themselves. God was persistent in prayer redeeming them. Do not lose heart the Kingdom of God is here, is coming, and will be fully enjoyed. Amen