

The Power of Persistence

Luke 18.1-8

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First Christian Church

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Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He 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 him 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 his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Today, I want to begin to talk to you about something that has evidently become a real concern to some of our church members. I have had numerous private discussions on the issue, and I suspect that represents only a small fragment of the discussions going on now among the congregation. It’s a subject on which there has evidently been some disagreement among our church family, with some supportive and others strongly opposed. I’ve been reluctant to talk about this issue from the pulpit, but it’s become so divisive that I guess the time has come.

That’s right, I’m talking about my mustache.

I’ve had mustaches in the past. I grew my first one back in 1976 and kept it until I graduated from Divinity School. Not only that, but some of the great figures in American history have also had them. Theodore Roosevelt. Dr. Martin Luther King. Albert Einstein. Clark Gable. Captain

Kangaroo. Admittedly, mine has never achieved that kind of stature. It's always been kind of scraggly. But I'm still hopeful it will eventually flourish and become what its owner intended it to be. I'd actually love to have one like Fred Ridenour. I've told him that. I think Fred has one of the great mustaches in western history. As a matter of fact, I started getting a hankering to grow a mustache again about the time you good folks gave me those great cowboy boots in honor of my 15th anniversary here. Now that I've got those boots, along with the Stetson that Joe and Peggy Fitts gave me some years ago, if I could grow a decent mustache like Fred, there'd be no stopping me. Next thing I'd be inspired to go get a horse, a saddle and a Winchester. I also have to tell you, if I hadn't kept hearing my mustache insulted with terms like "caterpillar," "dust catcher," "soup strainer" and "lip toupee," I might have shaved it off by now. But now I'm protective of it. It's like adopting an ugly dog. You find this poor old mangy dog on the side of the road and it's half-starved and you're thinking you probably need to take it to the shelter, but first you want to take it to your home and feed it and your friends and neighbors see it and start telling you what an ugly, mangy dog it is, and you ought to get rid of it, and you suddenly become very protective. "I don't care what you think, that's my dog!" So, I think, at least for the foreseeable future, that I want to persist in trying to grow the facial equivalent of an ugly dog. It's an understated quality, persistence.

But it shouldn't be. The four cardinal virtues are justice, temperance, prudence and fortitude. Fortitude is another word for persistence, for hanging there, for trying again and again and again and again. It's also an underrated quality in politics. Franklin D. Roosevelt was making plans for a great political future when he contracted polio. He was told he would never walk again and that his political career was over. He refused to quit, and spent untold hours trying to build up strength in his upper body. One of his most consistent workouts consisted of dragging himself from his office on the top floor of his mansion in Hyde Park (and later at the White House) to the front door because he didn't want his family members to try to rescue him in case there was a fire. He wanted his family members to rescue the others. He wanted to be able to rescue himself. Franklin Roosevelt was elected to four terms as President, and shepherded our country through the Great Depression and World War II. It's not often remembered that Ronald Reagan, whom so many remember with deep affection and longing, tried to win the Republican nomination for President three times. In 1968, he came in third for the nomination behind Richard Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller. In 1976, he tried again and came in second behind Gerald Ford. In 1980, he tried a third time and won the nomination and the election. When he was sworn in, a month before his 70th birthday, he was the oldest person to ever take the office. Many didn't think he'd make it past his first term, especially after he was shot and nearly died. He came back, the first President to ever survive being

shot in office [Theodore Roosevelt was also shot and survived, but he wasn't in office at the time]. Reagan served out two full terms, and continues to rise in the estimation of historians. Like Franklin Roosevelt, whom Reagan greatly admired, he persisted.

In our scripture, Jesus addressed the question of what it means to persist in faith. He described a widow who kept asking a judge to hear her case. The judge kept refusing. He may have liked the law, but he didn't care for the people for whom the law was created. This past Monday, I got to hear a great Christian comedian named Dennis Swanberg [thank you, Doug and Cary Thompson, for making that happen] who used to be a minister here in Texas. Dennis started off as a new preacher down in Saginaw, where he became friends with an old Baptist preacher who had served in the same church for 30 years. Dennis was really impressed by his longevity, and said to him, "You must really love your church." The old preacher replied, "I do love my church. I just hate the people." Well, this judge in the parable that Jesus told was like that. He loved the law, but he hated people, and he especially hated this persistent old lady who kept knocking on his door asking for justice. Finally, she wore him down, and he agreed to do his job just so she would leave him alone. Jesus told us to persist in prayer, just like that persistent old lady. Now it's not that Jesus is comparing God to that mean old judge—quite the contrary—but he is saying that if even that unjust judge could be worn down by persistence,

won't God, who loves us, and always wants to hear us, be moved if we are persistent in faithful asking?

Why is persistence important? Because God's not a genie in a bottle, and prayers aren't wishes. There are three basic answers that God gives to prayers: "Yes," "no" and "wait." If our prayers rise up and fall back like geysers, we'll never be able to tell the difference between "no" and "wait."

But how long do we have to wait? That's a great question and one the people of the Bible wrestled with. The phrase "How long" appears 58 times in the Bible. That longing for the Lord to do what we pray the Lord will do is especially summed up in Psalm 12:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

I can't tell you how many times, over the years, folks have asked me some version of "How long do you think...?" "How long do you think my mother will linger here in hospice?" "How long do you think before the divorce is final?" "How long do you think before I stop hurting?" "How long do you think before I find a job?" "How long do you think before my child comes home?" Waiting is especially hard in these modern times, because we are so used to instant gratification in so many other areas—to doing what we want, and seeing what we want, and going where we want at as soon as want to do, see or go there. But just as Jesus is always

knocking on the door of our hearts, asking to come in, so prayer can seem like we're knocking on God's door, waiting for an answer. An old African-American minister once said of this parable, "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is." Jesus' own prayer life showed that kind of persistence. Sometimes he prayed all night long. The night before his crucifixion, he fervently prayed, "Father, if it be your will, let this cup pass from me, but not my will, but thy will be done." The Gospel of Luke says of Jesus' prayers that night, "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground." Jesus spent a long time praying.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta has been officially canonized as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, but those who experienced her love and tenderness knew she was a saint long before she was officially recognized. When she was a young woman in Romania, Teresa had a great mystical experience—a profound sense of God's presence and call—and so she resolved to take care of the poorest of the poor, whom she found among the dying in Calcutta, then the poorest large city in the world. In 1950, she founded the Missionaries of Charity. As of 2012, her order had over 4500 sisters who served in 133 countries. They ran homes for people who were dying of AIDS, leprosy and tuberculosis; operated soup kitchens and mobile clinics; offered counseling for children and families; provided

orphanages and schools. Those who join an order of the Roman Catholic Church take the standard vows of “chastity, poverty and obedience,” but the Missionaries of Charity have a fourth vow, which is to give “wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor.”

But in addition to her mystical experience, the expansion of her great work in India and around the world, and the great acclaim that came from it—including a Nobel Peace Prize—Teresa began to experience a dark night of the soul that lasted nearly fifty years. She had begun with an onrushing feeling of God’s love, and then, as she told her confessor and wrote in her diary,

Where is my faith? Even deep down ... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness ... If there be God—please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul.

But despite those deep, aching doubts, which were only occasionally alleviated by a sense of spiritual consolation, she still did what she was called to do and she still prayed. It was out of that commitment—knocking on doors and persisting—that Mother Teresa wrote a prayer which she had framed and hung in her office so she could remember why she was doing what she did. Susan Buckley shared that prayer with our elders last Wednesday:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

Persist. Keep doing good. Keep praying. It's not about the others. It's about you and God, whose answer to your prayer—whatever that answer is—will be founded on God's love for you.

Amen.