

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

“WE’RE STILL HERE”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Mark Hostetter
Sunday, October 20, 2019

Scriptures: 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5 and Luke 18:1–8

Good morning!

So to start off this amazing Sunday, with all the kids here in the congregation today rather than off at Sunday School, I thought I’d begin today’s short message with a quick joke about kids. It was Christmastime, and all the kids were up front listening to the story of the Nativity, and how the Wise Men brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the infant Jesus. One six-year old who had just become an older brother, clearly giving it a lot of thought, announced loudly to his mother: “I don’t know what those things are that those Wise Men brought the baby Jesus, but Mom, a Wise Woman would have brought diapers.”

The parable from Luke today is a short but really interesting one, the persistent widow and the unjust judge. There was an unjust judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. Now that doesn’t sound like someone who should be in any position of power, much less a judge, but I’m sure we can all imagine people like that. And a widow came to this unjust judge asking for him to grant her justice. In Jesus’ time, this unjust judge would have been recognized as very bad, since widows were entitled to special consideration under the laws of the day, and this judge clearly was ignoring the widow and failing to give her justice.

For a while he refused, but she kept coming to him. “Grant me justice,” she repeated her same message over and over. And the judge 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 will not wear me out by continually coming back.” The judge finally gave the widow justice, but it was out of his own self-interest rather than any sense of applying the law to which she was entitled.

Now Jesus tells this parable, maybe even with a smile on his face, as he makes the point that even as this unjust judge grants justice to those who are persistent, how can we imagine that our loving God will not grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to God, who pray to God, day and night?

It’s a parable that’s meant to lift up the power of prayer. And there’s no doubting that’s important. Prayer, especially when it’s without selfish motives and open to God’s direction, is more about the connection to God, our drawing close to God just as God draws close to us, knowing that God is always present and accessible to us. When we focus on the fact that prayer is about relationship, more than just some kind of magical genie to grant our three wishes, our prayers shift from specific demands to a desire to be open and able to discern God’s intention. We pray for strength, we pray for perspective, we pray for peace, we pray for God’s will to be done. Our prayers are not for God’s sake; God doesn’t really need our prayers. Our prayers are for us, to calm our souls, to energize our lives, to draw us into closer relationship with God.

Jesus repeats this theme several times in his teachings. There's the parable of the persistent neighbor, the friend in need who repeatedly knocks on the door of a neighbor for the bread he needs to be a hospitable host. And the friend, the neighbor, eventually gives in, not because of their friendship but because of the neighbor's persistence. There are Jesus' well-known words about asking and it shall be given; seeking and it shall be found; knocking and the door will be opened. Time and again, the letters to the early churches, in James and Hebrews and Romans just to name a few, speak of the approachability of our God, the openness of our God, to our prayers. Persistence pays off. Even those who would not do something on their own, may answer our asking just to make their life easier.

Now when I was thinking of this sermon, as soon as the image of a genie came to my mind, I remembered a story of a couple in their late sixties, maybe around 68 years old, were coming up on their 40th wedding anniversary. Knowing his wife loved antiques, the husband bought a beautiful old brass oil lamp for her. When she unwrapped it, a genie appeared, and gave each of them one wish. The wife wished for an all-expense-paid, first class cruise around the world with her husband. Shazam! Instantly she was presented with tickets for the entire journey, side trips and expensive dinners included. The husband, however, wished he had a companion who was 30 years younger than he was. Shazam! Instantly he turned 98 years old.

So yes, this parable is about prayer. But it's also about persistence.

In education circles these days, character strengths have become a big focus. Education is not just about amassing information, or even just about becoming lifelong learners, both important. As researchers Chris Peterson, Marty Seligman and others have detailed, character strengths and virtues are critical for personal health, and for success: things like optimism, curiosity, zest, gratitude, self-control.¹ And at the top of the list is grit, perseverance, persistence – finishing the job, keeping on keeping-on, even after experiencing failure. Something that widow in the parable had a lot of.

Perseverance is a continuing theme throughout the bible. 70 years in exile, 40 years wandering in the wilderness, a thousand years waiting for the messiah, perseverance happens on a biblical time scale. Maybe patience is something we're meant to learn. But even more, perseverance may be more about God's sustaining message of hope in the darkness, in the face of seemingly unrelenting hardship and adversity.

Part of the biblical notion of perseverance, especially with respect to prayer, is not to falter or lose hope if our prayer is not answered immediately. We can't know if what we're praying for is what God wants, or if there is a deeper purpose we can not see.

But we are told to persevere in prayer, and to keep faith and trust in our God. The widow of our parable today did not lose faith in her God, faith that her perseverance would in the end lead to justice, however long it might take. And the depth of that faith, the depth of our faith, sometimes only becomes evident when we are forced to keep at it, in spite of our weariness. How disappointed might we be if our prayers seem unanswered. Yet our scripture is a step ahead, telling us not to lose faith, to persevere, and to continue in our relationship with our God.

Persistence has been the rallying cry of the modern feminist movement, now 70 years old, even more so after Mitch McConnell's infamous "nevertheless she persisted" during the 2017 Senate vote to silence Elizabeth Warren. And it's been used more broadly to persevere in breaking down barriers, despite being ignored, a theme worn with pride by people like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Hillary Clinton, Gabrielle Giffords, Elijah Cummings.

And when we think of perseverance and grit, how can we New Yorkers, here in the footlights of Broadway, not get that Sondheim tune stuck in our heads, belted out first by Yvonne De Carlo in *Follies*, and by Carol Burnett and Elaine Stritch and Shirley McLean:

Good times and bum times, I've seen them all.
And my dear, I'm still here.
Plush velvet sometimes,
Sometimes just pretzels and beer.
But I'm here.

And some recent news a little closer to home. You've all heard about the fire these past weeks up at the Presbyterian Camp at Holmes. A massive dump pile of woodchips, football field sized, 65-foot deep, caught fire and burned for literally two weeks, only just finally extinguished with the water from Westminster Lake (now a foot lower) and with the rains of last Wednesday. Talk about the perseverance of the 24-hour non-stop fire watch, of the nine neighboring village fire companies, of the construction crews, of the camp staff and friends who repeatedly volunteered to fight the inferno and did not give up for 13 straight days.

Woody Allen has famously said that 80% of success is just showing up. Who knows, maybe the other 20% is following up, showing up again and again.

We've all memorized by heart the famous words that Martin Luther King used, quoting 19th century clergyman Theodore Parker who first coined the phrase: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." It's become a political rallying cry in recent times, particularly on the progressive side, but the context of the quote by both King and Parker had to do more with the work of God, the saving grace of Jesus in the fullness of time, the hope that "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

So, exactly what does persistence mean for us in our polarized country, our polarized world? In a time that for many, on both sides of the aisle, feels very dark and foreboding? Listen to the words of our first lesson from Timothy that seem to ring so true today:

"For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but have 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, proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully."

Yes, for sure we are called to do justice, to demand that the broken be made whole, to write and march and speak and serve. That's what we've always done here at First Church, what we are known for as we hold high our beacon of light, maybe what we do best. But maybe it's not just about persistence in order to *win*.

Two articles in Friday's *Wall Street Journal* caught my eye. The first was about the new Pew Research Center report released on Thursday, about the continuing rise of the "nones," those who do not identify with any religion who now make up a quarter of the US population, up from 17% a decade ago. And a concurrent decline in those who identify as Christian down from 77% in 2009 to 65% today. The "nones" are not necessarily atheist or agnostic, they are primarily made up of those who consider themselves to be spiritual but do not adhere to a particular religious tradition. Now we could spend an entire Adult Ed series analyzing the report, but there may be some learning for today's theme of perseverance.

The other article was on the spiritual battle happening in Hong Kong, where political divisions run as deep as they do here in the US, where congregations are made up of people on both sides of a deep divide, where some pastors have resorted to conducting separate bible studies for people on each political side so that they can focus on the distinct spiritual needs of each.

So these articles and our current national politics got me thinking about what we are called to do, in polarized times, in times of disheartening news stories, in times when the church seems to be less and less relevant to so many. And I re-read today's scripture lessons on resilience and perseverance.

Maybe it's not just about persistence in order to win. Maybe it's just standing up and saying "We're still here." Proclaiming our values, our core beliefs, in a world that longs for meaning. When we proclaim who we are and what we're about, when we stand up and say "we're still here" and we stand for things like love, compassion, service, humility, empathy, connection – all of a sudden the way of justice becomes clear. So everyone sees clearly the way forward.

It's the "why" for what we do. Isn't that what's at the core of our commitment to Jesus Christ? The hope, the deep conviction that living those values shown to us in the life of Jesus will bring us and the world into closer connection with God and what God intends for the world? Political battles will always exist, as they always have, and passions will always run high, even among God's faithful. I know I will continue to march and to protest and to speak up against injustice. We pray for justice, and we demand justice from those we can influence. And as evangelists we boldly proclaim our God's message of love and grace and peace.

Fundamentally, sometimes it's just about holding our ground and saying "we're still here," we followers of Christ that place love over exclusion, compassion over judgement, connection over division, selfless service over self-centered motivation. Letting the world clearly see the faith we *know* gives insight into divine truth. We here at First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York have been doing just that for over 300 years, and we're still here.

As usual I wanted to leave you with a smile as we leave today, so another quick story, this one about missed connections and prevented persistence. Prior to their wedding, let's call them Jack and Diane, met with the minister to discuss their marriage ceremony and various traditions, such as lighting the unity candle from two individual candles. Couples usually blow out the two candles as a sign of becoming one, but the minister said that many people were leaving their individual candles lit to signify independence and personal freedom. The minister asked if they wanted to extinguish their candles or leave them burning. After thinking about it, Diane replied, "How about if we leave mine lit and blow out his?"

So as you go out in the world . . . pray, persist, draw close to our God of love. We're still here. And have a joyous Sunday!

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¹ Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Oxford University Press, 2004. Also, Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.