

Sermons at Christ Church

A rise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Pentecost XIX

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O persistent God, let how much it all matters pry me off dead center so if I am moved inside to tears, or sighs, or screams, or smiles, or dreams, they will be real, and I will be in touch with who I am and who you are and who my sisters and brothers are. Amen.

There's something about perseverance in all things and persistence in prayer that excites me. It is the key to every great accomplishment-nothing of any significant value has ever been achieved without perseverance. Think about the Nationals-they are now in the World Series-just a little persevering spirit goes a long way. Henry Ford, whom we all know to be one of the greatest American success stories, failed five times in business before he succeeded. A Ford Motor employee once asked him the secret of his success, Mr. Ford replied "When you start a thing, don't quit until you finish it." You must give yourself permission to succeed and that is only made possible when we refuse to quit.

Today's gospel story resonates with me in such a powerful way. It reminds me of one particular struggle of my mother. I also believe countless widows are faced with such issues in patriarchal societies. Widows are counted as one of the vulnerable in society because of the often neglect from a late husband's family. Widows often rely on the generosity of others to care for themselves and their children.

As many of you know, I am 21 of 23 children by my father with several women. In addition to the women with whom he had children, there were others with whom he had no kids. When he passed away and his will was read, he designated an amount of money to be given to a certain Georgina. The problem was, there were two women with the name Georgina: my mother and another woman- Georgina with kids and Georgina with no kids. But since there was no last name, nobody could really tell which of the two my father had in mind.

My father's estate had to grapple with whether the money was for the Georgina with kids or the Georgina with no kids. You and I would think that since there were no kids with the other Georgina, this should have been a no brainer-the money was for the Georgina with kids.

There was even a discussion of splitting the money between the two of them but someone kicked against the idea. The Georgina with no kids did not also suggest that since she had no kids with my dad, the money should be given to the Georgina who had kids to feed and clothe.

As discussions went on, someone from my father's family who had a beef with the Georgina with kids, insisted that the money should be given to the Georgina with no kids. Recognizing the grave injustice, my mother decided to fight for justice for herself and her children. I really did not understand why she decided to fight. But against all odds, she fought for justice. After a sustained and persistent demand for justice, justice was served and she was given an equal amount of money that was given to the other Georgina. The point is, my mother gave herself the permission to succeed by not quitting.

It took a great deal of time and effort but she did not waiver, she fought till those who had a say in the matter came to this realization, I believe, that there is an indomitable human spirit deeply anchored in the pursuit of justice-and until justice is served, that spirit remains restless. It is that kind of justice which is pursued by the powerless against the powerful-and the powerless do so with a strong belief that a wrong needs correction. I can hear the groaning and wailing of the widow in the parable story, why me? Why is the system skewed against the vulnerable poor? Why am I being denied the justice that I so deserve and need? But that indomitable human spirit that sits quietly within and fights injustice would not allow her to accept her situation as is. In the face of her powerlessness, she believed that her constant persistent and persevering appeal to the powerful judge could make a difference, she gave herself the permission to succeed by not giving up.

The challenges of being persistent-especially in our prayer life is because there is often the tendency to give up when we come up against a wall; we refuse to fight even when we are in the right. We lose hope in ourselves, in each other and are sometimes tempted to argue that God has given up on us. But the Old Testament story provides a counter narrative to the idea that God even gives up on us. If anything at all, we learn about a God who is persistent in love and so doesn't give up on His people. You would think that for all of Israel's faults-for abandoning their covenant with God, the gross injustice that pervaded that society, the neglect of widows, orphans and the vulnerable poor. You would think that after God's pronouncement of the punishment of exile, God would be done with them. But no!

The text actually helps us to understand what it means to be persistent in love-that is, no action of any one person-yours or mine is not enough for God to give up on us.

If God surely does not give up on us, if he is persistent in His love for us, then we absolutely cannot give up on ourselves, on each other, our pursuit for justice and our desire to make the world a little fairer each day. The new covenant actually invites us to also be persistent in love not only because we will know the Lord, but because God's law has now been written upon our hearts.

There is a story of a couple Bill and Sarah who were from Georgia but lived in Maryland. One of their rituals was to travel to Georgia every year for the state fair. Among the many things they could do at the state fair is to go for a helicopter ride for \$50. Bill had always wanted to go for a helicopter ride. When he first asked Sarah if he could go for a ride, Sarah responded, Bill, it cost \$50 to go for a ride and \$50 is \$50. But Bill did not relent, he will ask Sarah every year if he could go for a ride, and Sarah always had the same answer, Bill, it cost \$50 to go for a ride and \$50 is \$50.

On one visit, the pilot overheard Sarah tell Bill, Bill, it cost \$50 to go for a ride and \$50 is \$50. He approached them and offered the couple a deal. The deal was, they should not talk during the ride; not even a word about how excited they were. They accepted the deal and took their seats in the helicopter. The pilot zoomed off and did all kinds of maneuvering in the air, turning the helicopter upside down etc. When he finally landed, he told Bill that he was amazed he never said a word, to which Bill replied, I had wanted to say a word when Sarah fell off but because she always said that \$50 is \$50 I had to keep quiet. Even though Sarah always had an answer for Bill, Bill never stopped asking until his persistence was rewarded.

Paul in his letter to Timothy encourages Timothy to be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. Paul acknowledges that there will be times, situations and occasions which will present themselves as impediment to Timothy and test his faith, but Paul argues that he should not only be persistent when it is favorable, but even when it is unfavorable. Like Timothy, you should always give yourself the permission to succeed.

One area of persistence is prayer. It as an important Christian practice which often leaves us disenchanted-especially when we believe the answer is delayed or isn't quite what we expected or wanted. But prayer also humbles us because in the course of praying we recognize that we are powerless before the powerful Judge. The point Jesus seeks to make is, the fact that we are powerless before the Judge does not mean that the Judge does not care about us, nor should our powerlessness stop us from petitioning.

The righteous Judge actually invites us to persevere. Please know that perseverance is the refusal to quit. It is falling down 100 times and getting back up 100 times.

Perseverance is not a matter of forcing doors to open; it is about standing in front of those doors as long as it takes before God chooses to open them. It is about giving yourself the permission to succeed. Life is a marathon, not a sprint. The race doesn't go to the swiftest, but to those who don't give up. Don't give up, because you always have something to give, you always have something to offer. And especially during this stewardship season, you have more than enough to offer.

Contrary to the judge in the gospel story, the powerful Judge invites us to persevere in pursuit of what is right, and to persist in prayer. Pray and be persistent in prayer. Don't quit. Give yourself the permission to succeed. Amen