

Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

October 17, 2010
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Genesis 32:22-31
 Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
 Luke 18:1-8

Persistence in prayer

Today's parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge invites us to reflect on the value of persistence in prayer. Persistence may seem a very humble virtue to consider. Persistence has nothing particularly shiny or glamorous or heroic about it. It's not a warrior in flashing armor astride a white stallion who gallops in to save the day. It's not a powerbroker in a gorgeous Armani suit issuing commands from behind a bank of microphones. Persistence is much more modest than that, much more hidden and humble. Persistence in prayer is like a helpless widow who just won't quit. That woman is tenacious. She is resolute, dogged, determined. She won't be put off and she won't take no for an answer. Push her down and she only springs back up like weeds. That widow so pesters the unjust judge -- she so wears him down with her repeated pleas for justice -- that the hard-hearted judge finally gives in and grants the request so that he can be rid of her at last.

If a selfish, indifferent judge will relent and grant justice in the face of such persistence, how much more, says Jesus, will "God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to [God] day and night" [Luke 18:7]! God is nothing like that unjust judge -- God is generous, abounding in mercy, and eager to bring justice. So Jesus gives his disciples a word of encouragement. "Pray always," he tells them, "and do not lose heart" [c.f. Luke 18:1].

The Gospel writer tells this parable because Luke knows, and Jesus knows, and God knows how easy it is to lose heart. The early Christian communities were suffering persecution. They were praying, as Jesus taught them, "Thy kingdom come." They were waiting on tiptoe for his return in glory, for the consummation of all things, for the great day when justice and mercy and kindness would prevail at last on earth, and everything broken would be mended, and everything alienated and estranged would be reconciled and healed. But that day never seemed to arrive. Christ's return in glory seemed to be delayed. Had God forgotten them? Would the peace and justice for which they longed never come? Was their faith only so much hogwash?

Similar questions may beset us today. The news pouring in from the newspapers, TV, and Internet is often chilling and bleak, and there are plenty of voices inside us and around us that tell us to give up the fight for a just, kind, and sustainable world. "All is lost!" the voices say. "It's too late. We'll never reach a fair and peaceful resolution to the logjam in the Middle East, never put an end to

unjust wars, never stop racism, classism, or homophobia, never stabilize the climate or end the cascade of species extinctions. We'll never create the world that our children need and that our hearts are longing for. The whole thing is hopeless and we're going to hell in a handbasket."

Actually, I've never understood how to picture that expression, "going to hell in a handbasket," but you catch my drift: there are voices inside us and around us that urge us to quit and to slide into despair. Have those voices found a foothold in your soul? Are there times when you feel overwhelmed by the darkness of the world and want to crawl into a safe little cubbyhole and pull the covers over your head? Are there times when you want to raise a fist in cynicism and blame, or to drown your fears in too much alcohol, television, shopping, or busyness? If you know what it is like to feel discouraged, disappointed, or just plain depleted, then this Gospel passage is for you.

"Pray always," Jesus is saying to you. "And do not lose heart. Do not lose heart."

Persistence is what we need in a time like this, persistence in faith, persistence in prayer. Persistence has fueled who knows how many breakthroughs in medicine, technology, science, and the arts. I heard a story somewhere that Thomas Edison made a thousand failed attempts to find a successful light filament. When Edison's assistant complained about all that wasted effort, Edison replied, "Ridiculous! We now know a thousand ways it doesn't work!"

Persistence is useful in many human enterprises, and it is essential in prayer. Why is it essential? What is the value of persistence in prayer? For one thing, it brings us closer to God. Being persistent in prayer means that we keep showing up, keep making ourselves available for encounter, keep sharing what is truly on our minds and hearts. Prayer is not like speed dating. I have never done speed dating, but I understand that it is a kind of breathless round-robin event in which you meet a great many people very quickly on a superficial level. Persistent prayer is not like that. It's about taking our time and daring to go deep so that we can form a long-lasting relationship with the divine. For of course the great promise of prayer is that we don't have to settle for second-hand information about God, or for concepts of God, or for ideas about God. The promise of prayer is that we can come to know God directly, through our own experience. It is one thing to hear a preacher tell you, over and over, Sunday after Sunday, "God loves you. God is with you. God will never let you go." It is quite another thing to discover that truth for oneself, to come to that knowledge oneself in the depths of one's being.

So the first reason to be persistent in prayer is because that is how we cultivate a long-term relationship with God. A second reason is that prayer changes us. Prayer is not like mechanically firing off a series of faxes or making a bunch of automated robocalls, as if we can pray and at the same time stay at a safe distance from God. No -- prayer makes us vulnerable. Prayer makes us real. If we are

honest with God, if we are candidly sharing our hopes and fears, our confusion and disappointment, then we're getting up close and personal. Prayer is more like making love than like sending a fax, more like engaging in a wrestling match than like sitting politely at a tea party.

It feels right that the first reading this morning is the story of Jacob wrestling with that mysterious adversary that might be an angel or perhaps even God Himself [Genesis 32:22-31]. When we are persistent in prayer we must wrestle with our shadow, with our temptations, doubts, and anxieties, and perhaps even with God. In that arduous process we are, like Jacob, both wounded and blessed. Wounded, because we must acknowledge and accept how small we are, how mortal, finite, incomplete, and prone to sin. Blessed, because we discover how loved we are, how completely cherished. We may be small, but we belong to what is infinite; we may be mortal, but there is a life within us that will never die.

In my own experience of trying to pray like the persistent widow and to bring before God my longing for justice and peace, I have discovered that the more I weep over the suffering of the world, and the more ardently I long for the healing of our relationships with one another and with the earth, the more I sense that it is God's sorrow that is moving through me, and God's longing for healing that is filling my soul. Do you know what I mean? I hope that you have had that experience, too. It seems that the desire in our hearts for a world in which all beings can flourish is not a desire that begins with us. It is God's desire flowing into us, God's desire that is being expressed in our prayer. When we hunger and thirst for righteousness, it is God within us who is hungering and thirsting; when we long for peace, it is God's longing that we share; when we pray with compassion for the poor and weak, it is God's compassion that we experience.

This perception should make us bold in prayer, for God seems to be whispering our ears: "Yes, your longing for justice and mercy is my longing, too. Let that longing grow large, and let it burn bright. Whatever the circumstances may be, in good times and bad, be steadfast in your faith and persistent in your prayer."

Praying puts us in touch with inner resources that we never knew we had. It can fill us with energy, confidence, and determination. Yet prayer also teaches us to let go. Contemplative prayer, in particular, in which we notice and accept every moment as it comes, can ease the ego's addictive grasping and its urge to control.

I went back this week to re-read part of a marvelous book by the psychiatrist Gerald May, a book entitled The Dark Night of the Soul. With great care, Jerry May describes how contemplative prayer can transform our lives. Through such prayer we learn, he says, to expect nothing, to cling to nothing, and to hold on to nothing. In that experience of open-handed trust and non-grasping, we become "part of...a

flowing energy of willingness, an eternal yes resounding with every heartbeat.”¹
 Can you imagine it? A yes with every heartbeat. *Yes. Yes.* At this point, we no longer hope *for* peace or *for* justice or *for* healing, because we no longer hope *for* any particular result or any particular thing. We simply experience what Jerry May calls “naked hope, a bare energy of open expectancy.”²

In the last pages of the book he tells a thought-provoking story. He writes:

...[In] the summer of 1994 I joined a small pilgrimage to Bosnia. I had the opportunity to speak with poor people who had lost everything: homes, possessions, entire families. As they told us their stories through tears of grief, I sensed deep hope in them. Through interpreters I asked if it were true.

“Yes, hope,” they smiled.

I asked if it was hope for peace.

“No, things have gone too far for that.”

I asked if they hoped the United Nations or the United States would intervene in some positive way.

“No, it’s too late for that.”

I asked them, “Then, what is it you are hoping for?”

They were silent. They could not think of a thing to hope for, yet there it was -- undeniable hope shining in them.

I asked one last question. “How can you hope, when there is nothing to hope for?”

The answer was, ‘Bog,’ the Serbo-Croatian word for God.³

“Pray always,” says Jesus, “and do not lose heart.” I will give Teresa of Avila the last word.

*Let nothing trouble you,
 let nothing make you afraid,
 All things pass away.
 God never changes.
 Patience obtains everything.
 The one who possesses God lacks nothing.
 God alone is enough.*

¹ Gerald G. May, M.D., The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth, HarperSanFrancisco, 2004, p. 192.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 193.