

And She Persisted
Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher, October 20, 2019
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Luke 18:1-8

Today we celebrate those of us who have achieved an age that very few of our forebears could even think about. In 1901 the average life span for a woman was 50 ½. For those who are born in 2019, their expected life span is 76 for men and 80 for women. Today, we recognize and celebrate our long living members with the Golden Harvest Dinner. As we live longer, studies try to discover what makes for a happier, healthier life. Social scientists mark what they call blue zones, which are areas in the world who have an unusual longevity rate. Health and diet, good genetic makeup are key factors, include being in a caring community and living with a sense of purpose, being there for others. Belonging to a faith community where our purpose for being is not only for our own gain, but also for the needs of others. I would add one other trait to a long and healthy life, and that is persistence. Getting older is not for the faint of heart. It takes persistence to get out of bed each morning and put one foot after another. Literally and metaphorically falling down and getting up repeatedly over the years, not knowing what new and challenging circumstances we will face.

In the spirit of persistence, our scripture lesson is from the gospel of Luke. Jesus is addressing prayer and our connection to God. He does so with a parable about a woman and a judge. Jesus describes the judge as one who does not follow Jesus' teachings. And the judge is not a compassionate, love your neighbor as yourself type of judge. Yet, Jesus uses this judge to make his point that even a self-absorbed man like this judge will act upon persistence of a nobody, a widow advocating for herself. Therefore, how would the God of love and compassion respond to God's beloved? Listen for God's Word in our reading today.

Luke 18:1-8 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?”

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

It was a blustery January Sunday. I was the first to arrive at church. As the wind whipped the snow around the door, I began to wonder if I would be the only one at church that Sunday. I was in the back hallway when I felt a blast of icy air, and I watched Edna, a woman in her nineties, struggle to balance her walker on the icy steps and open the door. Now, Edna was the last person I thought I would see on this cold windy January morning. I ran to help her in, grateful that we made it this far without a mishap. And I said rather sternly, as she concentrated on moving her walker into the hallway, “Edna, what in the world are you doing being out in on a day like this?” She stopped what she was doing and lifted her head. And her bright blue eyes looked at me directly and said, “Why this is Sunday, and this is my church!” Well, she knew how to silence this young condescending pastor! I still think that for her health and safety she should have stayed home, but I remember her answer every Sunday morning when I look out and see the faces coming back each week.

It was not only her persistence of overcoming all the obstacles to get to church each week but it was also that she truly wanted to be here.

What makes it so remarkable to me is the context from my background. You see, growing up in a minister's home, going to church was a given. My father always said that we had a choice whether to get up early on Sunday morning and go to church or not. It was quite simple. If we chose not to go to church, then we did not eat! Valuing our stomachs, we attended! Then I became a minister and once again going to church and eating were related. I am always humbled when I look out and see different generations of you here from little Ruby to Evelyn and all those who we are honoring today. You made the choice to come, and it was not necessarily connected to your stomach! I am humbled and in awe. For many of you, your response would be like Edna, saying, "This is Sunday and this is my church." Because you are here, Oak Grove is better for it.

Persistence, in connecting with God, is Jesus's message in this parable; don't give up, don't get discouraged, pray and pray again. When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith? Have Jesus' followers persisted?

My alarm went off entirely too early this past Thursday morning. But I was determined after several invitations to make it to the Men's prayer breakfast at Denny's. Men from Oak Grove having been meeting, checking in, drinking too much coffee and tea for me, eating and most of all, praying at 6:00 AM on Thursdays for over 60 years! Now that is persistence. That is over 3000 gatherings to come together for prayer. And, I bet if you ask those who have been part of such a steady and persistent group, that the support, friendship and strength cannot be equaled. Does every prayer and plea that they have uttered over the years come fantastically true? Of course not. But does gathering so faithfully add to their lives and their outlook. Does it give each member a sense that they are not alone in this world, no matter what befalls them? They persist, they pray. (And they welcome new members anytime!)

As we gather here today, what makes us persist? What makes that woman in Jesus' parable persist? What makes us keep our ties to a church that ebbs and flows in influence in our world today? We know that many people out there do not find the strength and support of a community of faith. Many find other things to do at this time and who do not utter the words, "Why this is Sunday and this is my church." The answer to these questions may be as different as each of us in this room. In some way we have discovered the benefits of being connected to Oak Grove is better than not being connected.

We do not know what kind of justice the widow in Jesus' parable was seeking. Was her persistence warranted? Was it for her or for someone she dearly loved? As a widow she was powerless and vulnerable, what made her risk standing out and taking the wrath of a perturbed judge? Did she know she was in over her head?

There are moments when we feel out of control and things are happening that we alone cannot fix. There are times when our option is to pray and pray again. How much more will a loving God connect with us than an uncaring judge?

One of the members of the men's prayer group told me he started coming to the group in the 1960's because of a health crisis with a family member. And he stayed. What kept him coming was the connection to each other and to God. The persistence in knowing God not only hears our concerns and prayers, but provides other vulnerable people to stand with us and keep calling upon God for us. A health scare, a child in danger, a world that is overwhelming, a need for others; whatever the threshold that gets us to reach out. And, when we do, there we meet others with the same need.

Jesus introduces a parable about prayer with a phrase that is translated in the New Revised Standard as, that the followers "would not lose heart." The Greek word in this case is, "will not faint." He did not want his followers to be discouraged or fade away. Most certainly, whatever the

followers thought a Messiah would be like, it would not have been this teacher from Galilee. No one would have expected Jesus, a carpenter's son from a small town, as the definitive Messiah. And they certainly did not know what was in store for Jesus, or for themselves. They could never have imagined at the time that Jesus was telling them this parable that a revolution of epic proportions was forming. Jesus tells them persist; things may not be changing as they would have imagined, but continue to persist. God is listening and God is here. Don't faint, don't fade away.

Our cries for justice, our acts of kindness, our gifts for others, may seem insignificant and puny compared with the dealings and the resources of the world, and who and what have influence today. We have little concept what kind of impact we make for justice and goodness in this world. And yet, where would Bloomington be, or the World be, if this church was not sitting here on Old Shakopee and Penn? How many lives have changed because we persisted?

We gather, we make the effort, we give our time, our energy and our support to something for which we may never see the benefits. Do not faint from it, persist. Call upon God, and call again. Do not give up.

To the people who drive past and barely notice who we are and what we represent, the most irrational thing that we do is that we do not give up, and we do not despair, even when the cold winds gather around us and our world appears lost.

It is that persistence that brought Edna out to church every Sunday that she was able. It is that unwillingness not to faint that keeps God's message alive even in times of despair. There are times when we are tired, when we are defeated, when we have lost our purpose or meaning. There may be times that we wonder, why do we even bother?

For all for who are experiencing a generous amount of years, thank you for embracing life that has not always been gracious to you. Thank you

for persisting to call upon God when all you hear is silence. Thank you for showing others a way that give us heart. Thank you for your presence with us. In midst of all the disappointments and struggle, in moments of discouragement or depression, as well is in moments of tenderness and joy, God's work is visible here.

Thank you, Edna, for a lesson taught to a rooky fledgling pastor long ago. God does not give up on us and because of that together we persist.

Thanks be to God. Amen