

SERMON: Persistent Faith

TEXT: Luke 18:1-8

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne is not like the other prisoners at Shawshank. He is well-educated and sophisticated. And he has been wrongly convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. But he is clever and surprisingly hopeful. He tries to make life in prison better for himself and the other prisoners.

He decides he wants to establish a library in the prison to offer more than the few dozen books available to them. So, he begins to write one letter a week to the state prison board, asking for the funds to make it happen. His pleas are consistently ignored or rejected, but he is not deterred. For months on end, he continues to write one letter a week without fail. Finally, a check is issued, and it comes with a letter from the prison board stating, "Please stop writing to us." With a smile on his face, Andy proclaims to his friends that he will now begin writing two letters a week.

I'm sure you recognize the parallel with today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. Andy Dufresne wore down the state prison board with his persistent letter-writing, just as the widow's

persistent pleas for justice eventually wear down the unjust judge. We can imagine her pounding on the door with both fists, while the judge throws up his hands and thinks, “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.”

The reading from the Second Letter to Timothy shares a similar message: “I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”

I must admit that I am not as persistent when I come up against closed doors. I’m afraid I give up too easily. Instead of banging on the door until my knuckles bleed, I start looking for other doors or windows that open more easily. Rather than adhering to this biblical message, I have come to believe the secular message that “you can’t fight city hall.”

I know I’m not the only one. And today we are faced with the question. Are we proclaiming the Good News of Jesus, persistently, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable? Whether or not anyone is paying attention? Are we

patient in seeking to convince and encourage one another? Thanks to social media, we've become adept at rebuking one another, but we are sadly lacking in patience, and rarely is there any tone of encouragement in our words.

Back at the beginning of this passage, Luke writes, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." So, the widow in the story is the one who is in need and *praying* (as it were) for justice. But the one to whom she *prays* neither fears God nor respects people. For most of us, this metaphor is flawed, because an *unjust judge* is not an accurate representation of the God to whom we pray. The God we worship has great respect for his beloved children, and would never delay in helping us.

In fact, as Jesus concluded the parable, he said, "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."

Well, there's another problem. If God is eager to quickly grant justice to us, then why are we having to cry to him day and night? We have all persevered in prayer, only to have those prayers seem to fall on deaf ears.

And then that last line of the parable is the real kicker, as Jesus turns the tables on us: “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

You see, we have gotten caught up in the idea that God really is the unjust judge. That we have not received justice, even after crying day and night. That God does delay in helping us, despite our pounding on the door with both fists. That our prayers do fall on deaf ears.

But this is not about God or God’s faithfulness. This is about us and whether we are faithful, and persistent, and patient. God has proven his faithfulness to us over and over and over again. Yet we continue to question it. It is we who need to show PERSISTENT FAITH to God. Jesus has bracketed this parable with that message: the parable is about *our* “need to pray always and not to lose heart.” And “when the Son of Man comes, *will he find faith on earth?*”

And when our prayers are not answered in the way we hoped, does it mean that we didn’t pray hard enough? That we weren’t faithful enough? No. It means that God has already answered a prayer that has yet to be prayed.

You may be familiar with a website called Caring Bridge. I first learned about it when someone in my congregation asked prayers for their friends, whose infant was diagnosed with a serious heart defect. The parents were writing about their journey with this child on Caring Bridge – the treatments, the progress, the setbacks, their fears and their hopes. Other friends and family could sign up to receive an email each time an update was posted. This saves the family from having to tell the story over and over again to all those who are asking.

Since then, I have followed people with severe injuries and cancer. Awhile back, a friend from high school posted about his cancer and a new treatment he was trying. He asked for people to pray – not just a general prayer for healing – but he requested that prayers be very specific regarding the results he wanted.

I can certainly appreciate such a request, and I find nothing wrong with asking God for exactly what you want. On the other hand, I'm concerned that when we become so narrowly focused on a singular outcome, that we may miss the myriad of other ways that God might be working and answering the prayers that we haven't even thought to ask.

I believe that we learn from unanswered prayer. We learn about ourselves, and we learn about God. I believe that unanswered prayer can take us down a path that brings us closer to God, when we have to keep asking, when we have to keep pounding down that door, night after night.

The lesson Jesus teaches, that we should pray always and not lose heart, is a lesson about faith. Faith is persistent. Faith is patient. Faith perseveres.

Like Andy Dufresne in the Shawshank Redemption. He's in prison. He has all the time in the world. Yet he does not lose hope. He keeps knocking at that door with focus and PERSISTENT FAITH. Not only that, but if you know the story, he also spends years digging his way out of that prison using a tiny rock hammer. He is patient and he has a purpose.

I know a woman, now in her 80's, who has had a very difficult life. At one time, she had four children. She lost two of them before they were ten years old. Her husband died in his 60's, within weeks of being diagnosed with cancer. Then, her fifty-year-old daughter was found dead in her home. Her remaining daughter, the youngest, was married to a man who struggled with depression. One day, just

weeks before Christmas, he stepped in front of a semi-truck. His own daughter was just 8 years old.

Despite the unimaginable loss this woman has suffered and the innumerable prayers gone unanswered, she has never stopped coming to church. She still attends regularly to this day, despite significant loss of hearing and sight.

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”

May we never lose heart. May we live in PERSISTENT FAITH... to the glory of God!

AMEN.