

Sermon 10-17-10 “Patience and Persistence”

Have you ever been diagnosed as having “itching ears?” That’s a phrase St. Paul uses in the second lesson we read this morning! I can remember a time when this might have described my condition. In fact you might say that I itched all over. Let me explain.

In college I was very active in extra-curricular activities but never concentrating much on anything, leaving one interest and moving on to another, juggling too many balls in the air, so to speak. If we had had the internet then I would be the kind who hopped from one site to another, itching to find something that would fully engage my attention and interest.

I was in what might have been called a “state of chronic potentiality”, itching for the next possibility to come along. That was until I was drafted into the army just weeks after the Korean War started. That was NOT what I had been waiting for! But then I started going back to church. I thought I had graduated from church when I graduated from high school, but now when I re-discovered my church it was almost like it was the first time—and it has never stopped for me.

There was so much then that I didn't know but at least I knew that I knew what site it was that I had been searching for.

I think that is why I have a special welcome to newcomers who come here as seekers and searchers, because I know that if it connects with you as it did with me, you will want to stay on this path with me to discover more.

Staying on the path of persistence to discover more is where the Old Testament lesson and Gospel take us this morning. Here is Jacob in the story from Genesis—wounded, exhausted after a long night of wrestling with the mysterious one he is sure is God; persistently, hopefully hanging on and crying out, “I will not let you go unless you bless me!”

And here in the Gospel this morning is the widow, being a pain in the neck and banging on the judge's door. Who wants to be called a pain in the neck, and who wants to be like Jacob who was known to be a lying and cheating deal-maker, even wrestling with God? They had to be persistent all right!

I too have had to learn persistence. My newfound discovery of church led me to seminary and I wanted

to learn how to pray. It was only later that I heard the old story of a girl watching a holy man praying at the river bank, and I realized how much the story was about me.

The girl asked the holy man “will you teach me to pray?” He agreed and took her to the river. The holy man instructed her to lean over, so her face was close to the water. Once she got her breath back, the girl asked, “What did you do that for? The holy man said, “When you long to pray as much as you long to breathe, then I will be able to teach you how to pray.”

When you care enough to wrestle with God like Jacob, when you care enough for justice that you persist like the widow, *then* you will be filled with the power of persistence to engage whatever life brings your way.

That's where Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and people like him can get confused. Huckleberry thought briefly for a while about praying, but since it didn't produce any fish hooks for him, and since it didn't help his teacher get a man—he quickly gave up.

But staying engaged persistently is the key to any life really worth living and in fact is the deepest form of prayer. That way we can discern that we're not praying to a God "out there" but God in the midst of life. Then God becomes part of who I am individually and corporately, where I know I need him the most.

As for me I'm still on the journey I started over half a century ago as a young draftee seeking and searching for a future that seemed distant then, but now I know has been in my blood stream for all this time. I know now that nothing is more important than perseverance and patience as I stay focused, seeking every day to find how my life can be touched by a patient and persistent God who has never stopped reaching out to all of us.

Where is Jacob who is wrestling with God now in our generation? I think of the rescued miner with 32 others coming up Wednesday night after 69 days saying "I saw God and the devil—and God won!" Where is the persistent widow today? I pray that God will find them now, once again, in the hearts and minds of people, believers and doubters, like you and me. AMEN!