

“I Will Not Let You Go”

Sermon - October 21, 2007

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What does Tiger Woods do after he wins another tournament? He goes out and practices his putting, hour after hour. What does Gilbert Arenas do after a basketball game? You guessed it: he goes back into the empty court and practices jump shots and shooting baskets, over and over again. What separates the outstanding musicians from the others? Does their talent make them any different than the Tiger Woods and Gilbert Arenas with their special gifts? —No, the secret for them is practice, practice, and practice.

The three bible lessons this morning are all about persistence and perseverance, and all have surprises in them: Jacob wrestling with God—(can you imagine that?) Paul warning Timothy about the people with itching ears—people channel-hopping until something holds their attention. Luke telling a humorous story about the woman who keeps bothering the bad judge until he gives in to her plea for justice.

Unlike the assortment of bible readings that come to us on some Sundays, there is a common theme in all of the readings: The theme of persistence. I realize that in these days when everything we see is about “instant gratification”, this may not be a very popular theme. But here it is. Here is Jacob, 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!” Here is the widow, being a pain in the neck and banging on the judges 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 were persistent, all right. Practice, practice, practice? I took piano lessons but I gave it up after three years, because I didn't practice, and why didn't I practice?—because I didn't really care enough about it.

In college I bounced through a lot of things the same way, getting involved with activities and projects for a while, and then on to something else. I wasn't fully engaged with anything. In my own way, I was like the “summer soldier and the sometime patriot” that Thomas Paine wrote about in Revolutionary war days, in so many ways—including my praying, and certainly my church attendance. Like to many others, I went to church when I felt like it, thinking that maybe later I might do better. I was in what has been called a “state of chronic potentiality.”

It was only later that I heard the old story of a girl watching a holy man praying at the riverbank, and 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. Then he pushed the girl's whole head under 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 long 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, when you know like St. Paul that the new revelation of God's presence through Jesus is just one generation short of extinction,
Then you will be filled with the power of perseverance to engage
 Whatever life brings your way.

For a long time I had a plaque on my bookcase where I could see it easily, of a tiger looking down from a tree, and the caption was "hang in there!" I would look at that and be reminded that the victory in any kind of battle most often goes to the one who can stay with it even five minutes longer. Staying engaged is the key to any life really worth living, and in fact, staying engaged and connected, is the deepest form of prayer.

I suggest that the deepest form of prayer is when it engages you and the life you live with God. That way we can understand that we're not praying to a God "out there" but God in the midst of life. When we become engaged with God, God becomes part of who I am individually and corporately, where I know that I need him the most.

Praying can never be separated from acting. I think that's where Huckleberry Finn and people like us can get confused. Mark Twain's classic friend 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 Miss Watson get a man—he quickly gave up!

The first thought we might have from Jacob's wrestling with God and the widow pestering the judge is that they were trying to change God's mind. The primary effect of prayer as engagement with God and life is not a change in God, but a change in us. God recognizes our needs even before we do. It's not God who needs to change, it is up to us to align ourselves with God's unconditional love, his justice and his compassion. Our prayerful life needs to have persistence, not because God is deaf but because opening our hearts to God and staying engaged, is no easy matter.

No, it's not an easy matter, and that's why we should take advantage of every opportunity to align ourselves with God's purposes. Remember Woody Allen-- who said that "50% of success is just showing up"? We hang in there when we go to the effort to show up here on Sunday. And we do it when we participate in making the "Stone Soup" worth eating for all of us next Sunday by contributing whatever onions and carrots and broccoli we can to the mix. It will be a lot more tasty if all of us pitch in part of it!

All of that may seem pretty ordinary and superficial, until we remind ourselves that practice and persistence are absolutely essential to any lasting and legitimate

engagement in life, the kind that can change us if we recognize them as encounters with God.

Let me close with two examples of persistence and perseverance which for me give some resonance and depth to the power of this special key to living. The examples are of course quite different. The first is the story of Richard Blumstein. Richard is a Jewish neighbor who came out of two retirements to work in St. James' office. We knew how indispensable he had become when he had a major, paralyzing stroke last March. Last Friday, seven months later, I can tell you that Richard walked up the stairs to the church office with a cane, ready to have lunch and give advice. What has brought him to this point? It is his perseverance with daily physical therapy which still goes on. And with that, I also believe it is through the consistent and supporting care and concern for him these last seven months not just from his wife Bea but from members of this parish through their time with him and their prayers for him.

The other example is Mother Teresa, who is already on the way to sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church and in the hearts of millions of believers around the world. A decade after her death, her secret letters which have been recently published show that she spent almost 50 years of her ministry among the poor without sensing the presence of God in her life! Her ministry in her lifetime brought her the Nobel Prize in 1979, and now through the compilation of her letters she is having a new ministry to people like you and me.

It has been said that "faith isn't yours until you have doubted it right to the ground." Who are the people who have experienced some absence of God in their lives? I say: everybody. Atheists, doubters, seekers, believers, everyone! Mother Teresa's letters expressing her doubts are now a ministry to us all.

The ministry of perseverance and persistence goes on. Where is Jacob who wrestled with God now? Where can you find the persistent widow today? I pray that God will find them in the hearts and minds of people like you and me, believers and doubters.

So help us to hold on to You, I pray to you Lord God, while you already have hold of us. Give us the courage to let you be God and open our hearts and minds to your spirit. Help us, Lord, to discover over and over again the truth of the psalmist whose words we affirm this morning, "My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."

AMEN