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No U-Turn Here

2 Timothy 4:1-5; Luke 18:1-8

You, someone you know or someone you have heard of, spent hours, weeks, and months training for an athletic event – a marathon, a meet, a national championship, or something else. The same holds true for those preparing for a recital; a vocal, instrumental, dance competition, or a role in a play. And it holds true for those learning or honing a skill, undertaking a major remodeling project, working to complete a significant personal or work project. Some, but not all succeed – winning the prize or seeing the project through to completion. Yet for the most part, we admire those who keep on, who are persistent in their attempt to achieve their goal.

In the 1994 movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, the main character, Andy Dufresne, is wrongly convicted of the murder of his wife and her lover. Andy is sentenced to prison. Through the prisoner underground procurement process, Andy acquires a 6-7” rock hammer. After 2 years in prison, one night in 1949 Andy carved his name into the concrete wall of his cell with the rock hammer. As he did so a chunk of the concrete fell to his feet. At that moment a plan formulated in his mind. He began the long, patient, and meticulous process of carving a way out of his cell using the rock hammer, which he managed to conceal in his Bible for many years. He did his work at night and the next day would take the bits of rock debris out to the prison exercise yard and leave them there – no more than a handful at a time, that which he could put in the cuffs of his pants or in his pockets and so not draw attention to the debris left in the yard. He managed to hide the hole in his cell by placing different posters of Hollywood actresses over it. In 1966 Andy made his successful escape from the prison. One of the things they found of him was an old rock-hammer near worn down to the nub. For this innocent man, 17 years of slow, persistent effort led him to his goal.

In the passage from the Gospel of Luke we are introduced to an unnamed woman, a widow. Because she is the one who continues to go to the judge, this widow probably had no male relatives to provide for her welfare; so she lived outside of the normal social structure.

It has been written:

In many Biblical passages the widow is linked with the orphan and alien, three groups of people susceptible to exploitation, oppression & injustice. Since the widow had no male protector, God was considered to be her main defender, and all Israelites were to treat her justly.

The Bible legislates the protection and support of the widow and exhorts against oppressing her. Prophetic texts in the Bible claim that the welfare of the defenseless widow, orphan, and alien was the measure by which God determined the moral fiber of the people of God. ... As probably the least powerful person in her community, one on the bottom of society's power ladder, she has no rights and no advocates. Early Christianity singled out widows as recipients of social welfare, establishing an organized means of caring for this group of women (Paula S. Hiebert, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*)

It seems obvious that this woman knew of the biblical injunctions to protect and support her. She expected justice for herself. It has also been written of her “that, according to societal norms, she should simply have accepted her fate; by refusing to do so, she acts so out of character that the judge is astonished.” Her persistence, her chipping away at the wall the judge has put up between himself and her, as she presses her case before the judge, is lifted up by Jesus as he tells this story.

The judge, on the other hand, is not shown in a good light. He has been called “villainous, bad, unjust, immoral, corrupt, grossly neglectful, cruel, grumpy, insensitive & hardened, a person of great power, crooked” and more. We are told in the text that he neither feared God nor had respect for people. He seems to have set himself above the rest of his society. His concern seems only to be for his own welfare. Many have suggested that he ignores the widow for so long because her opponent, whoever that might be, is rich and has paid off the judge. So he is “a wheeler-dealer, one not moved by issues of justice. He responds only to power and influence (Russell Anderson, *Lectionary Reading Workbook*, Series V, Cycle C).” He was not fulfilling the Old Testament words that judges were appointed to defend the rights of orphans and widows.

Yet the widow does not keep in her place, give up or let up. She uses the only power she has – asking for justice persistently, day in and day out. Like the effect of a continuous drop of water wearing on one’s nerves, or the effect of continually chipping away at a cement wall with a small rock hammer, the widow wore the judge down with her bothering him for justice on her behalf. The text tells us that the judge said to himself, “...so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” Now if you were following along in one of the pew bibles as this lesson was read, you may have noticed that the text has a footnote at the end of this sentence. The Greek of the words – that she may not wear me out – is “hit me in the eye.” One might also say, “To hit under the eye” or “to buffet or disable an antagonist, as in boxing.” The footnote in the Bible takes the Greek quite literally, as it reads: “so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.” Or it may be a metaphor “give me a black eye before the public.” So even though he has no respect for people, he does not want to be shamed before the public. He does not want to be publicly embarrassed, especially by someone of such low stature in the community. Though we have no indication as to how long this took, the judge finally granted her justice.

We are told in the text that this parable is about the need to pray always and not to lose heart. We are not to give up on our prayers. Our prayers are to continually go up to God. As the widow’s persistent request was for justice, it is most appropriate for us to include the whole of life in our prayers including matters of injustice that affect us and others.

Now the story does not say that God is like this bad judge, responding only when pestered enough by someone. We are to pray continually and never lose heart. This can be wearing and hard work when we do not see the result of our prayer. But God does not ignore us. Even if we must pray for days, weeks, months, years, God does not forget us. God does not view us like the judge viewed the widow. God loves us and wants to help us.

As do we, the people for whom Luke wrote his Gospel, needed to hear this. They wanted justice quickly. They were suffering persecution. Some of the community probably had even died. The return of Jesus to earth had not occurred. What was going on? They had not expected to be in this faith business for the long haul, to have to endure, always to be persistent and not give up, maybe not even to see God’s response to their

prayers in their lifetime. Though Jesus said that God will respond, he also asked the question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” In a sense, no matter how long this will take – centuries, millennia, or longer, no matter the situations of the lives of the people of God, what is important is that the people remain faithful. This was crucial, for Luke’s audience, for he understood that there was a good deal of time to come after their lifetime.

The executive of the Presbytery of Great Rivers is the Rev. Sue Krummel. She sends out a weekly e-mail commentary/observation about life for the people of God. In the one dated October 15, she commented on her 16-month old grandson and that there is a trend now to teach children this age sign language even before they can speak. She goes on to write:

Our grandson actually combines the words and signs – milk, more, eat, please, thank you, all done. ...

What I noticed especially is his use of ‘please.’ He is a very cute boy –kind of what North Americans of European descent expect babies to look like – blonde, blue-eyed, pudgy cheeks and all. ...

He has been around a lot of people with whom to interact all of his life, including cute, energetic high school girls. He is quite a flirt. When he says ‘please’ it sounds like someone whispering the word ‘pease’ with a few extra ‘esses’ at the end. He gets a big grin on his face and crinkles up his nose and eyes – quite irresistible. The word is accompanied by the sign for ‘please’ – a series of small circles on his chest. His parents expect him to use the word with every request and he is quite good at it.

Here is the problem. He thinks that saying ‘please’ is a magic wand. That is, he thinks that using the word, accompanied by the sign and the cuteness will always produce whatever he is requesting. Sometimes the answer is ‘no.’ Even grandmas know when enough tiny Vanilla Wafers have been consumed. Once in a while there is no more of what he wants. Or, he wants us to grab our cats down from the place to which they have escaped from him so that he can come up with handfuls of fur again. The answer in all those cases is ‘no.’

As I watched him treat his favorite word as if it would always produce the result he desired, it reminded me of the way we sometimes think about prayer. We get ourselves into the right state of mind; we gather with the right people or alone, whichever seems most appropriate for the circumstance; we use the right words; we pray with all of our might. But, sometimes the answer is ‘no.’ It is very disappointing. Sometimes it is almost unbelievable. But not every desire of our hearts is in line with the will of God and, so, whether we understand the reasons or not, sometimes the answer to prayer is ‘no.’ Do we receive the answer with grace and hope, or do we receive it like a 16-month-old being told that he cannot have one more cookie or one more chance to terrorize the cat?

The Rev. Krummel ends her e-mail with these words:

I hope that you have time this week to engage in fervent prayer for yourself or for a loved one or for the world in which we live; and I hope that your prayer will be answered in the same way an indulgent grandma answers the ‘peasssss’ of her only grandson!

We do know this – God wants us to keep on praying and never to give up asking and looking for the best for others and for ourselves, for justice for others and for ourselves. God does delight in granting that which is good. But prayer can be hard work. The results may not be seen in our lifetime. It takes

faith to pray continually through difficult situations. Yet we must. “God wants imprinted on our very souls the habit of prayer.” We must trust that God will prevail, will have the final word.

It has been written:

Persistence in prayer does not mean that we get what we want, if we pray hard enough or long enough. We have already learned this in life, just as Sue’s grandson is learning that he does not always get what he wants. No, persistence in prayer is more about wanting a relationship with God. This relationship will come only through the persistent and continual process of speaking and listening, and more listening than speaking. God wants us to want God more than anything (Russell Anderson, *Lectionary Reading Workbook*, Series V, Cycle C).

A minister in Scotland wrote, “The u-turn the judge made so that he could finally rid himself of this persistent widow contrasts with God’s grace that goes out to all of God’s children.”

God is loving and fair and just. God does not make any u-turns in order to hear and answer our prayers. God will hear our prayers. It is who God is, to hear our prayers.