

Sermon – “Being Persistent”
Sunday, October 20, 2019
Scripture Readings: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8
Trajan McGill
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our 1st reading comes from the second letter to Timothy, one of the several pastoral epistles in the New Testament, letters written to individuals rather than entire worshipping communities, encouraging and guiding them in their leadership of the church. Listen now for God’s Word to you in these words from Second Timothy, Chapter 3, verse 14, through Chapter 4, verse 5.

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

^{4:1}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: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

###

The uncertainty we sometimes feel about trust in God’s ultimate providence for us and the struggle of faithfully carrying on in that trust are nothing new to the modern world. In our Gospel reading, from Luke chapter 18, verses 1 through 8, Jesus addresses his hearers with an assurance that persistence is not in vain. Listen for God’s Word:

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"

⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

###

What do you persist in? Both of our readings today speak insistently of persistence.

Now some of us may be, by nature or practice, quicker to give up on things, and others more prepared to carry on even when achieving their goals is of dubious likelihood. But nevertheless, we all persist, in all sorts of things.

One thing we all persist in is foolishness.

Each of us has our own style of doing this, of course. Some people persist in throwing good money after bad. Some of us never seem to learn to choose our battles and persist in fighting every single one of them. Some people keep going after the same type of romantic partner again and again, no matter how many times that proves to be a bad idea.

For myself, I'm a regular customer of what is known as the "planning fallacy." Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky described this phenomenon a few decades ago, giving a name to the nearly universal but completely illogical tendency people have to apply unrealistically optimistic estimates to how much time will be needed for a task or project no matter how many times they have done something similar before in real life. For whatever reason, actual experience never gets fed back into one's time estimates for the next attempt.

A simple example would be a relative of mine who drove the same route about once a week on average for years, and arrived late almost literally every single time, because every single time some kind of minor setback occurred somewhere along the road—a slow driver, a construction zone, maybe bad weather or the need to stop for gas, turning what might have been a 35 minute drive under perfect circumstances into a 45-minute drive. Rationally, the response after a few such experiences would be to recognize that this drive simply takes 45 minutes in reality, not 35, and adjust one's departure plans accordingly. But oddly, this never got absorbed. The lateness was always blamed on the slow-moving dump truck, never on the flawed drive time estimate...even though *every time* there was a slow-moving dump truck or something like it.

He even knew it was silly, and started jokingly blaming his lateness on a worldwide conspiracy to always deposit a slowdown somewhere along the way of wherever he was going. And yet the actual behavior—when he decided it was time to get in the car—kept on operating under the expectation that the trip would go flawlessly.

This is called optimism bias—the tendency to plan from the expectation that things will proceed in the ideal manner, even though there is no realistic reason to believe that. While it isn't actually confined to optimistic people, it may be a greater struggle for those who have a general outlook expecting the positive. Give me a day off, and I'll give you a list of 18 things I might get done. Two of them might realistically fit in the same day.

Or give me a project, and I have to consciously factor in the planning fallacy if I want to be close. When I was developing software for a living, I'd look over a project, spend time thinking through its requirements and all of the pieces that needed to be designed and built, and I was pretty good at estimating the number of hours needed. By which I mean that my mind

would intuitively generate a pretty good number for estimating time needed for each element of the project and the thing as a whole...*if everything went perfectly and there were nothing involved in the project other than simply grinding out the code.*

But obviously that's never true. Plans change; something that looks simple turns out to be complex; fixing a silly bug wastes half a day; getting a question answered wastes another; all of the administrative management of the project needs to happen. There is never just the work.

One day I looked at how I kept making the same mistake, and realized that my problem was not that my estimates were disconnected from reality. They were not all over the map; they were consistently off by about the same amount. I recognized that if I took the number of hours my intuition supplied for a perfectly executed project with no administrative overhead, then simply doubled it, I was remarkably close to accurate. But I always have to do this—step back and intentionally adjust the plans my mind wants to make—because my mind persists in thinking I can do more in a given amount of time than I really can.

I am sure you can recognize the foolish things you persist in, as well. Maybe it is the belief that alcohol will make things better and ease your pain, when you can already point to a consistent history of alcohol making things worse and mostly *causing* you pain. Maybe it is continuing to hide from things as if when you don't think about them, they aren't real—lots of people avoid going to the doctor on this odd piece of logic, and others let relationships die that way. Maybe you think you'll win big in the long run if you keep playing the slot machines, even though you know perfectly well they are *intentionally designed* to take more money away than they give. Or maybe you're just a longtime Chicago Bears fan.

And once you get past the individual, to the whole human race, the foolish persistence is there, too, only on a larger scale. How many times will everyone together buy high and sell low, pretend that economic cycles do not exist, or listen to those who would set themselves as kings over us? How many times will the peoples of the world make exactly the same mistakes as their forbears, resulting in war, famine, unrest, often highly predictable and yet never predicted? Or as Handel's *Messiah* puts it, in a paraphrase of the start of Psalm 2, "Why do the nations so furiously rage together? Why do the people imagine a vain thing?"¹

It's all a bit much, how much we persist.

Why do I call to mind how we persist in foolishness?

Well, partly because the very weaknesses that can be our downfall often are the same as the strengths that can be of good service to us and others in our lives. If we can keep on somehow believing that hitting the snooze button one more time will still get us out the door on time, against all the wisdom our knowledge and experience would offer us, then maybe we also can persist in other things without regard to the known costs.

¹ From George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* (HWV 56), Movement 40, from Part II, alluding to Psalm 2, specifically verse 1, but with the entire opening of that Psalm speaking of foolishness on the part of the nations of the earth: "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 'I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.'" (*New Revised Standard Version*)

Maybe we can persevere in honesty or faithfulness even when those things are painful. Maybe we can persist in giving grace and love to persons even when they treat us badly. Maybe we can persist in forging ahead even when the light at the end of the tunnel is cloudy and hard to see.

Indeed, the very Gospel itself is, by all worldly measures, a daft and outlandish idea. The Apostle Paul reminds us in his first letter to the church at Corinth that “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,” and saying also, in famous words, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” If we can persist so easily, so undeniably, in every other foolishness, why not also this one? Later in the same letter Paul declares himself a “[fool] for the sake of Christ.”² The world’s wisdom is astray and askew, and we know it. Maybe then for this thing, the Gospel, which the world regards as foolish but which is the source of our life and salvation, we can pray that we will do no less than persist in our folly.

For Christ tells us that we have good reason to persist in hope. God can be trusted to bring justice and deliverance. Jesus gives us a story, in the passage we heard today from Luke, about a woman whose persistence brought justice in the end even from someone who cared nothing for justice at all.³ “How much more,” Jesus implies, can God’s ultimate care for us be counted on when we persist in faith and prayer? We know of the failures and the disasters and wrongs of the world; some of them we participate in ourselves and I named earlier. But if we have heard the message of God’s love and promise for us, then we have good reason to persist in the hope that the evil and foolishness that today persists in the world will not, in fact, be the end of the story.

If, then, we can persist in prayerful hope, then it is in that hope that we can persist in our mission. We are the church in the world; citizens of the kingdom of God who are called to live by the ways of that kingdom and invite others in even when these things cause us to suffer according to the earthly kingdoms we inhabit.

Let us strive, then, to do as the reading from 2 Timothy advises: “be persistent”; “endure”; “carry out [our] ministry fully.”⁴ But what is that about? What are we here for?

Some have wondered what we are here for not just in the broadest sense, but in the simple question of why God, once the salvation story was accomplished, did not simply cancel the rest of the world and skip straight to the part where the broken world gets remade and set aright. Well I can’t say that any of us know that, but I can say that there is no reading the New Testament without believing that God has real purpose for the role the church plays in the world during whatever minutes or eons may remain. We are asked to carry on, to go and share the Gospel through both word and deed, loving our neighbors after the example of Jesus. We are called to persist in our drive to meet and know our neighbors and care for them, across the whole world that surrounds us, from the local community to the furthest reaches of the earth.

² The first specific quote comes from 1 Corinthians 1:23, the second from 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, and the third from 1 Corinthians 4:10 (*NRSV*), but in fact the letter is expounding at length on this topic for the entire first four chapters.

³ See Luke 18:1-8.

⁴ From 2 Timothy 4, verses 2, 4, and 5 (*NRSV*).

It is for each of us to hear the call of Christ upon our own hearts, and it is for all of us to encourage and help that spark in one another. Mission fields abound, from simple, humble friendship and caring conversation to world-traveling relationship-building, from standing up for ethical practices in the workplace to providing our neighbors with safety in the home, from a whole circle of people together persistently offering prayers for their neighbors to any parent intentionally sharing with his or her child of the love of Jesus Christ.

If you don't know where your mission fields are—and none of us probably do entirely—then persist in prayers, for your eyes to be opened to what God has placed before you. If you do know what you are supposed to be doing, even in some small way, take it up, dust it off, and boldly persist in that. This, the church, is the place to find one another and team up. I've spent hours this week putting together a booklet full of mission activities of Westminster, which you are invited to pick up and find things to jump right into. But that's just a tiny set of hints. God has put together a whole *world* full of mission. Be on the lookout for it. Mission is not a curated set of activities put on by the church that you sign up for; it is something to which you, who *are* the church, are called and sent by Jesus Christ, and which this whole body of people, acting as the body of Christ, is here to cultivate, develop, encourage, grow, and carry out in concert with one another.

Thanks be to God for the scriptures which teach us of this work, guide us and correct us in it, equip our minds and hearts for it, and in which we find the hope by which we do our work. May God's Spirit fill us with persistent joy and steadfast endurance as we seek, hear, and live out our mission in the world. Amen.