

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, October 20, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“THE PERSISTENT GOD”

Luke 18:3

I start today with a couple stories today from Great Britain. A few years ago sixty-two-year-old Miriam Hargrave of Yorkshire, England, finally passed her driving test. It was her fortieth attempt. After such persistence you would assume she started driving right away. But after spending so much money on driving lessons she couldn't afford to buy a car. Maybe it's just as well. How comfortable would you be knowing that the driver coming at you had failed the driving test forty times?

Another Brit, the Rev. David Guest required 632 lessons over 17 years before he passed his driving test. “When I was told I passed I bent down on my knees and thanked God,” he said. The 33-year-old clergyman spent \$11,000 on lessons, wore out eight instructors and crashed five cars before that momentous achievement. The secret to his turnaround was that he finally switched to a car with an automatic transmission. His problem was that he could not distinguish between the clutch and the brake while driving a car with a standard transmission.

Well, the British people have been noted for their sense of perseverance, perhaps individually, but certainly as a nation. Such persistence was on display during the First and Second World Wars. In fact, some historians tell us that Germany defeated England militarily in 1940, but that Hitler didn't know the extent of his victory, and England simply refused to admit defeat. And the British people must now draw on that sense of persistence in these days as they face whole drama around Brexit.

God's people, Christians, should be noted for a sense of persistence, as well. We should be people who persevere, who never up.

Now the readings today from both 2nd Timothy and Luke 18 speak to us about the need to persist. For example, Paul says to Timothy, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed...I solemnly urge you, proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable...always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully...” And then Luke 18, “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart...”

Yes, Christians are called to persist. But we don't have to persist on our own. For our persistence comes from God. The persistent God gives us the quality of persistence.

Let's speak first about God's persistence.

God is the persistent one. Persistence is deep within his very character. Let's consider the parable Jesus told in Luke 18. In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God or respected people. But a widow kept coming to him asking him to grant her justice against her opponent. For a while he refused but later said to himself, "Though I don't fear God or respect people, I will grant her vindication so that she will not wear me out by her continual coming. The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant vindication 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."

Often we think the lesson of the parable is this - if the unjust judge will finally vindicate the poor, persistent widow, how much more will God give his long-suffering people what they need and long for? Surely God will vindicate our faith and our prayers. That is Luke's interpretation of Jesus' parable. And it's a good one.

But maybe there's yet another. You see, we often assume that we are the poor, persistent widow in the parable, and God is the judge, though of course, very much different than this unrighteous judge. But what if – and hold on for this – what if God is like the poor, persistent widow and we humans are like the unjust, arrogant slow-to-respond judge?

Isn't that what humans are like? God comes seeking the honour due his name. He comes seeking our faith and our love and our obedience. But we put God off. We do things in our time, not God's. We are high and haughty. We sit in judgement on God and his ways. We think we know better. We don't fear our Maker and in so doing we fail to love one another as God commands. Our disrespect for God leads to chaos and brokenness and injustice in God's world. Yes, humans are very often like the unrighteous judge.

And God is like the poor widow. God just keeps coming to us again and again, not in strength but in weakness. He came as a babe born in Bethlehem who grew to be a humble carpenter, the sinless one, crucified by our sins and for our sins. The Son of God died in utter weakness and humiliation but was raised by his Father to live forevermore. Of course, God could come to us in great power and command our love and our faith and our obedience. Instead God comes to us in his word, he comes in the preaching of Christ crucified and risen; he draws near by the power of the Spirit; he speaks to us in creation, he whispers to us in our conscience. God keeps coming to us again and again seeking our faith and obedience. God is constantly probing and seeking a way into our lives so until we finally say "Yes" to God. The tools God uses to wear down human resistance, at least for now, are suffering love and persistence.

One day of course, it will be different. The Son of Man will come again to judge the living and the dead, and every eye will see him and every heart will be examined for true faith. Those who have said Yes to God and his Son will inherit eternal life, but those who have rejected God or ignored his constant pleading will be lost forever. The question for humans is not about God. He's not the problem. He's fine. He's in control. His faithfulness can be counted on, even when it seems that answers are slow in coming. The question is about us. Will we get off our judgement seat and give God the honour, the trust, and the obedience he deserves?

Now we here, most of us, have said “Yes” to God and his Son. God’s persistence with us has worked. We are those who honour God, imperfectly no doubt, but in some way we have opened ourselves to the God of enduring love and persistence. We acknowledge him alone as King of the Universe. We confess Christ as Saviour. We are God’s elect, though that means elected not only for eternal life, but also to be God’s witnesses and servants in this world, as Israel was. We belong to God and he will not let us go. Jesus asked, “When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?” To that we answer, “Yes, he will, for he will find it in us who by God’s grace and God’s gift have persisted in the faith. We will be in that number when the saints go marching in.”

You see, persistence is in God’s character. When the world was wicked and corrupt in the time of Noah, God did not give up on his creation, but saved Noah and his family from the flood and started over again. Jesus, the Son of the living God, persevered and was obedient unto death, even death on the cross for our salvation. God is the persistent one.

And now the persistent God gives us the quality of persistence. Our persistence comes from him. He doesn’t just call us to persist, but gives us persistence, as a gift to be received by faith.

So what are we to persist in?

Well, for one thing, prayer. Luke says – Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart. And with God’s gift of persistence we can keep praying without losing heart, even when answers seem slow in coming.

One man told me recently that he was becoming discouraged in prayer because God doesn’t seem to be giving answers in a timely way. We’ve all felt that way sometimes. I told him to keep on praying, and also to pray with other people and to share his concerns with the prayer group in his church. For if you share your requests with even one person and have them pray for what you are praying for, it encourages you to keep praying. Or pray with a group of people. We have been doing that in some of our small groups here in the church. We also have a prayer chain to pray with you and for you. If you’ve been praying for a concern for a long time, ask the prayer chain to pray for that same concern. It’s confidential, and we have some persistent and faithful pray-ers on that prayer chain. So as we depend on God’s persistence and the persistence of others, we are encouraged in our prayers.

We are to persist in the faith. Paul writes to Timothy, “Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” We need to persist in the tried and true faith of the church represented by the Apostles Creed. Persist in listening to Scripture and in reading Scripture. Scripture is the plumb line, the measuring stick for Christian faith and doctrine. Paul says, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that we may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

And then Paul calls the young preacher Timothy and the whole church to persist in proclaiming the gospel message. “Proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable, convince, rebuke and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching.

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires. They will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.”

Friends, that time is not just coming, it's here. Many people, even in the church, prefer entertainment rather than sound doctrine. There are false teachers around, both in the church and on TV to scratch their itching ears. One person told their minister, “I listen to you on Sundays, then I go home and watch Joel Osteen and I feel better.” I hope no one says that about me, and I'm not really criticizing him. I know Joel Osteen is very popular and helpful to many people, but some have said there is something lacking in his ministry. Is it the cross, the cross on which Christ died for our sins; the cross which we are to take up daily as we follow Christ? Perhaps that's it. So if you like to listen to Joel Osteen, do so, don't listen to him alone. For there are other and more solid preachers on TV you can listen, as well.

Church, be careful of preachers who may lead you astray. Heavens, there are even self-declared atheists preaching from pulpits and pastoring congregations. This is not right. So be discerning. Persist in prayer, persist in faith, persist in your reading and study of Scripture; persist in the church's mission of proclaiming the Gospel.

One more story from Great Britain. Some years ago Winston Churchill was invited to address the graduating class at a boys' school. He came to the podium and said, “Never, never, never, never give up.” Then he sat down.

That's the message for the church today in these perilous times. “Don't give up. Never give up. Persist.” And we can, for right now the persistent God is giving us the quality of persistence.