

Sermon for Pentecost XIX Year C
The Stewardship of Persistence

We are mid-way through our annual Commitment to Giving campaign. Last week the gospel invited us to consider the importance of gratitude and the power that expressing our gratitude brings to our life together and to our life of faith.

Gratitude in response to God's grace is faith active in love. It's one of the ways God makes all things new . . . beginning with you and me.

This week Jesus tells a parable about the persistence . . . which means the continued or prolonged existence of something.

Living generously requires great faith and great persistence.

We see persistence in the story of Jacob from Genesis.

Jacob, whose very name means "deceiver," is headed back home after being away for many years.

If you remember this old, old story,

he had to run for his life because he deceived his twin brother Esau, cheating him out of their father, Isaac's, blessing.

There was bad blood between these two brothers and now at long last Jacob and his entire family are headed back home.

But what kind of reception is he going to get when he comes face to face with the brother he cheated?

Maybe Esau still wants revenge and is just waiting for his brother to come near so he can settle the score.

With all of this on his mind,

Jacob spends the night alone by the river Jabbok.

He wrestles with a man all night long there on the riverbanks.

Yet that "man" was no mere human being, but the Lord God, whom Jacob refused to let go until he blessed him.

Following that great persistent struggle,

Jacob got his blessing and a new identity . . .

and a limp as a reminder and a sign of his new identity.

He is no longer Jacob the deceiver, but he is now Israel,
meaning “he strives with God.”
Holy persistence, holy striving, drove Jacob to stick it out and persevere
as he wrestled with God.

As stewards and managers of God’s gifts entrusted to our care,
we are called, like Jacob, to persevere and persist in faith.
The truth is, we are often tempted to give up in our faith.
Problems within and without seem to plague us—
both personal and public—at home, in our communities, in our nation,
and, yes, even in the church, in our life together.
It does seem as if evil too often gets the upper hand.
We wonder if lives—ours included—
are really being impacted or transformed by the gospel.
And so instead of persisting in faith,
our love and trust begins to grow cold, we become cynical.
In our bible study of Paul’s letter to his protégé Timothy,
the apostle exhorts and encourages him to “fight the good fight”
by pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and
gentleness.
He charges Timothy—and all Christians of all times and places—to
continue in what we have learned and heard in Christ Jesus.
This is really important because without this steadfast persistence in
continuing with what we have learned and firmly believed,
we become like those Paul warned Timothy about.
We will “not endure sound teaching, but . . . will accumulate . . . teachers
to suit our own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth
and wander off into myths.”
Elsewhere Paul writes we should not tire in “doing what is right.”

The stewardship of persistence in faith is critical for sustaining and strengthening of our faith in the promises of God and in striving with God to make all things new.

Without *persistence* in faith, there is resistance to faith, and we will become obstacles, impediments, and stumbling blocks to coming of God's kingdom and God's will being done—in small ways and in large ways.

The stewardship of persistence is seen in the gospel lesson in the parable Jesus tells about a widow who is persistent in going before a judge to petition him to grant her justice against her adversary.

Eventually the judge grants her request—even though it's not because he cares about her cause or about justice. Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable to his disciples because we *need to pray always and not lose heart*.

Jesus concludes his parable with a question—which I would say is the whole point of the parable:

And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

The answer will be yes if we persevere in prayer, but if we don't . . . it seems faith will not be found on earth.

So, yes, it is a call for God's people to persist in lives of faith and prayer and not giving up.

Though health declines and financial security go down,
God's people do not give up!

Though the federal government may shut down,
God's people do not give up!

Though our circumstances in life may go down and cause us to wonder,
God's people do not give up!

God's people do not give up, but by the grace of God we persevere in faith, continually crying out to the Lord and seeking his face in all things, trusting what the Lord Jesus tells us is true:

And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

Our God nothing like the unjust judge.
But you could say God is more like the persistent widow.
God pursues us, persists in coming after us,
giving us grace and not what we deserve because of our sin and
disobedience . . . and lack of persistence and faith.
The good news is that God is faithful even when we are faithless.
God's goodness and mercy follows us all the days of our lives.
Though our sins of thought, word, and deed testify against God,
though we have neglected doing justice and loving kindness,
though we have failed to practice faithful stewardship of
of God's gifts of time, talent, and treasure,
yet God continues to persevere day by day
giving us all that we have and are,
with mercies that are new each morning.
We can persevere and strive because God perseveres and strives with us.

The stewardship of persistence figures greatly
into living generously as God's people.
Luther once said that "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing,
and suffers nothing is worth nothing."
Because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus,
we now see our lives and the world around us in a new way.
What we have is not our own—it is entrusted to us from God.
Whether what we are managing is small or large,
we are called to persist in faithfully managing all things to God's glory
and for the blessing of others.
Through your commitment to giving in your tithes and offerings,
faithfully and persistently given,
the work of Christ, God's kingdom, is being done.
Lives are being touched with the good news in tangible ways.
Human needs are being addressed with care and compassion.
Our church building is maintained and improved, all to the glory of God.

So let us persist and strive in prayer and in faith active in love
and in committing to living generously.

We can persist and strive because the One who promises is faithful.
Behold! He makes all things new, beginning with you,
each and every day.
The One who is the alpha and the omega is the Way.
So let us persist and strive as never before.