

“Keep At It”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 18: 1-8

So, my week could be summarized by the post I put on Facebook on Tuesday, which read: “Why does everything break or go bad at the same time?” Here’s why.

Two weeks ago, the computer that we use for all of our Sunday morning presentations died. Just quit with no warning. Ann Hamel scrambled to find a local repair place that could thankfully retrieve all our Power Point, video, and other files, and place them on a new computer. A day later, the Fellowship Hall air conditioners stopped working – all three circuit boards were fried and had to be replaced. On Tuesday of this week, I was standing talking to Lisa in the office, when all of the sudden the fire alarm started going off for no apparent reason. The backup batteries had gone bad, and after several attempts and silencing the alarm, they came on Wednesday to fix it. Then there’s this (pointing to the projector that’s not working). Last Sunday, we found this projector had decided it would no longer display the color blue on Power Point. Jon Barnhouse, Ann Hamel, and I finally figured out Tuesday night what was wrong. Hopefully, we can get it fixed in the next week to ten days. And last week we had four dead trees removed from in front of the church.

I think it was Patty McKinnon who replied to my Facebook post, saying, “It happens to everyone.” You’re right, Patty, it does. But I just wish for our sake and the church’s budget’s sake it had been a little more spread out than this!

In all seriousness, Patty is right. Series of events like this do happen to everyone. It could be things at your house that seem to break all in succession. It could be things at work that are challenges one right after the other. It could be things at school that feel like obstacles that never seem to stop.

Or it could be series of events that occur in your life that make you wonder about the reality of God’s providence and love. A loved one is diagnosed with cancer, then a friend is killed in a tragic accident, then you discover your child has been hiding an addiction from you, then your spouse loses his or her job. It can happen – it has happened. And for a person of faith, it can provide a moment of deep conflict and uncertainty. Is God there? Does God care? How can I remain faithful in the face of such overwhelming circumstances?

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge that Jesus tells in this morning’s lesson from Luke speaks to persistent faith in the face of

overwhelming obstacles. It not only helps us consider how we are to respond in such trying circumstances, it also helps us better understand the nature and essence of God, and how we are called to connect with God in prayer. But it also challenges us to examine how seriously we take our faith, for as Jesus says at the end, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

I especially like the way Kimberly Bracken-Long describes the scene of Jesus telling this parable. She writes: *Just when you think you have Jesus figured out as a teacher, a healer, and a man of prayer, he goes and tells a story like this. Who knew Jesus was a comedian too? It is not hard to imagine his listeners throwing their heads back and slapping their knees as they laugh at this ridiculous tale. A woman pounds and pounds on the door of a rotten politician who could not care less about her plight, until finally he sticks his head out the window and shouts, “All right, already! Knock it off! I will give you whatever you want if you will just shut up!” They laugh because they know this woman. She always gets a raw deal, because she has nothing – no husband, no inheritance, no social standing. They know this judge, too, the one who is only out for himself. No public servant, this one, so they guffaw at the idea of one their own, this powerless woman, annoying the (creepy) guy everyone loves to hate until, finally, he does something good in spite of himself.*

Good story! They laugh, and then they sigh, and they remember that Jesus told them that this is what prayer is like. By now Jesus may even have our attention, too. How many of us hammer away at God’s door, but to no apparent avail? The mother of young children is struck down by cancer, and so we pray and pray and pray, but death comes anyway. We are worn out from praying for comfort and relief in the wake of yet another natural disaster. The radio brings news of more way casualties, even though we continually pray for peace. Is this really the way it is supposed to be? (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 188-190*).

It can become discouraging when we pray and pray and pray, and do not see the results we want or expect. And perhaps Jesus knew that common experience of the believer when he told this parable. For in telling the parable, he uses an example of who God is NOT like – that is, God is NOT like the unjust judge. “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them” (18:6-7). Remember how the parable is introduced: “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lost heart” (18:1).

That’s great and all. But how are we not to lose heart when we see injustice in our world? How are we not to lose heart when innocent lives are ended far too early due to violence or disease? How are we

not to lose heart when we struggle to understand why forces out of our control seem to constantly be working against us? Really, Jesus? Don't lose heart?

Perhaps what we need is a slight reorientation in our perspective. The parable speaks of the persistent nature of the widow, and we believe we are called to be persistent in our prayer life, which is part of it. But, as one commentator puts it: *Let us focus not only on our persistence, but also God's persistence. One way to summarize the biblical message, the good news of the Old and New Testament, would be to speak about God's persistent, unshakable, everlasting love for us, for all God's creation. Yes, we deserve God's condemnation, as the Brief Statement of Faith puts it, but God is so persistently in love with us, God's love is so sovereign and unshakable, that we can trust in this God to bring about justice. We can be sure that God hears our prayers, our crying day and night, even though we may not see any results yet. God has not forgotten us; God will not delay long in helping. Of course, we grow impatient, losing heart and hope. How could we not?*

It is here that the persistence of the faithful enters the picture. Because we know of and have experienced God's persistent love in Christ, we try every day anew to persist in praying "Thy kingdom come." Praying is and always has been hard work in the interim - between God's promise and its fulfillment, in the life of Israel and in the life of the church living between the first and second coming of Christ - as is keeping hope in our hopeless world. Praying means hopeful trusting in God, not in ourselves.

*A perfunctory or even non-existent prayer life of the believers may have many reasons; often we find at the core of it a faith that has lost trust. The widow kept coming to the judge, hoping against all odds, persistent, determined, and relentless. The believers keep praying, hoping against all odds, persistent, determined, and relentless. Not because they are "good Christians" or because they possess such a great and strong faith . . . but because the Spirit has given them the courage to do so, to pray without ceasing in a broken and fearful world (A Brief Statement of Faith). In a way, the widow in Jesus' parable represents not only the need to pray always, as Luke puts it, but also the Spirit's incessant work of encouraging us to pray, the Spirit's nagging presence and unrelenting perseverance (Margit Ernst-Habib, *ibid*, 190-192).*

But Jesus ends the parable with a question - not only for his listeners at that time, but also for all of us: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (18:8). This parable is about God's persistent, loving nature. It is also about our willingness to trust and believe in God with a persistent faith. So, when those series of challenging events occur in our lives, do we keep at it in faith, or does our faith drift away?

You know, we are all busy. Being the parents of two teenage children, our life is very busy. And Tom has shared with me that one of the great challenges of leading these dynamic, incredible youth of our church is their absolutely busy schedules of school, sports, and extra-curricular activities. But, as he very accurately put it, all of us are busy. The question becomes where does the church and your faith fall within that busyness of life.

And that can be said of all of us – whether we are young or old. Does our faith melt down into the same level as all our other activities in life, or does it rise above to a level of priority that guides everything else we do? What are others observing – our children, our visitors, our neighbors – by our actions or inactions when it comes to faith? When we experience a series of bad events, does our faith get weaker and less-persistent, or does it grow stronger and more-persistent? How can we complain about the lack of faith or commitment of others if we have failed ourselves to keep at it?

“And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (18:8).

God loves you unconditionally through his only Son, Jesus Christ. No matter what you go through, God will never let you go. Live your life in gratitude for that persistent love, so that you might keep at it in faith even when things don’t always go your way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.