

+

Persistence

Sermon, Pentecost 21, Proper 24-C, October 17, 2010

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

Deacon Daisy Kirkpatrick

Jeremiah 31:27-34, Psalm 119:97-104, 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5, Luke 18:1-8

The lessons today emphasize the value of persistence, of keeping on keeping on. As the writer of Second Timothy¹ tells us, “I solemnly urge you to be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.” As we look around, we see that our numbers have dwindled, but this is nothing new. I remember growing up at St. John’s, Ithaca. There were three services every Sunday and three choirs and a large Sunday school. At that time there was a social expectation that on Sunday morning one went to church. This assumption has passed away; now we are here because we want to be here, not because our parents or our neighbors expect it of us. We have found the joy, the reward, of our persistence.

But persistence doesn’t always feel rewarding. Last Sunday a couple from Ithaca attended here for the baptism of the Lardin child. They used to attend the Episcopal Church at Cornell, but the chaplaincy has gone through some difficult times. They no longer have a Sunday morning service, but worship late on Sunday afternoon. This suits the students, but the more mature members of the congregation have found this distressing and many have left. They told me they frequently worship at the “Church of the Comforter,” in other words rolled up their quilt. But they aren’t happy; they miss Sunday morning worship and have not yet found a church to call home. In a time of controversy some people leave; they vote with their feet. Some experience the “itching ears” mentioned in the lesson and so “wander away to myths.”² All of us are subject to discouragement at times and wonder if “sticking with it” is really the best option.

When I started thinking about this sermon, it had been raining for several days. The weather was dismal, I was tired and suffering from ennui, which is listlessness, a dissatisfaction from lack of interest. It was difficult to combat this feeling because it seemed so trivial, which then caused me to feel guilty. But there was a distinct lack of joy within me. I was experiencing fatigue of the soul; I wanted to give up, to walk away. But then I thought if I leave, I become subject to the unjust judge. I would be alone, not fed, and this important link would break down. In my case, working on this sermon pulled me out of the fugue.

Many of us experience this at times. We ask ourselves, “What is the point? Why bother?” But we don’t always have a sermon to write! There are a number of things we can do to combat this ennui, this spiritual fatigue:

1. Get some rest. Wrap up in a warm blanket and rest our bodies and our minds
2. Quiet our minds: avoid newspapers and TV, spend time alone, don’t talk
3. Be silent, experience stillness or read a spiritually uplifting book, pray
4. Reconnect with nature, go for a walk or work in the garden.

All of these practices may put you back in touch with your true center. When we are in our true center, we can reconnect with the joy of life, the joy of experiencing the oneness of all creation.

¹ First and Second Timothy and Titus comprise what are referred to as “The Pastoral Letters” because they contain many instructions for daily life. There is much scholarly debate as to their authorship, but it is becoming generally agreed that the author was probably not Paul the Apostle, and that the letters were written some time after Paul’s death by members of the churches that he founded.

² 2 Timothy 4:3-4

Sometimes we become discouraged when we see things changing over which we have no control. We wish that things in the church were more like they used to be – but they aren't. Our discouragement happens when we become attached to externals. The outer form may need to change, it is the inner thread that is unchanging, that holds us together. We need to be willing to let go of the familiar, the “way it's always been,” and focus our attention instead on that inner thread and how that may be best expressed and experienced in our current circumstances. We need to be willing to let go of the familiar and allow different ways of doing things to bring renewed inspiration. The outer is not always the same; it is the inner that is constant.

Another source of discouragement can be getting caught up in the shortcomings of the people in the Church. People bring their faults, grievances, and petty ambitions to church. This is even more true of the clergy because we spend more time here, are more heavily invested in it, and have more opportunities to misuse power and control. We all bring our brokenness to church seeking healing but sometimes healing is difficult to find because we are blocked by our own failings or distracted by the brokenness of others. The Church is both a treasure and a deeply flawed institution; The Church is a human institution and thereby subject to all forms of human frailty on all levels; yet it is the steward of the Sacraments.

The church is all about connecting with God and with others; living the Christian life is not something that happens well in isolation. Christianity depends on the lived experience of the Holy Spirit in groups. It is through the constant renewal brought about by compassion and forgiveness that this institution of which we are all a part can become ever more effective as a source of health and wholeness. The church is about reconciliation. The dictionary defines reconciliation as “the reestablishment of cordial relations.” Cordial – that means from the heart. This means heartfelt forgiveness of yourself and others. Too often when we say the Lord's Prayer, we only give lip service to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us;” and we ignore the *quid pro quo*³. If we want to be forgiven by God we are required to forgive others; and that reconciliation must come from the heart.

A person in love with the source of all life wrote the portion of the Psalter that we said this morning. We were told that it is wiser to live within God's law than civil law or the law of society. And in Jeremiah, “The Lord says, ‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people.’”⁴ God's law is natural law, harmony with all that is. It is deeper than reconciliation; it is harmony, it is unity of purpose, of being in sync, of living in sync with everything that is around you. It is when we persist in our faith that our entire being flows in harmony with God's creation. Then there can be no discouragement or ennui; there can be no discord. All the pieces of our lives are in unity and all of us together can worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Thus will we taste the sweetness of the words of the Lord.

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.⁵

³ Literally, “something for something,” the concept of getting something of value in return for giving something of value

⁴ Jeremiah 31:33

⁵ Ephesians 3:20-21