

**PERSISTENCE: NEVER GIVE UP (On Not Losing Heart) –**  
A BCUCC Sermon by Dan Stern, 10/21-07  
Luke 18: 1-8 (corrupt judge, persistent widow) & 2 Timothy 3 & 4

“There will be times when people will have no stomach for solid teaching, but will fill up on spiritual junk food,” we are told in 2 Timothy—“People will turn their backs on truth and chase mirages.” We’re living in such times. People seem ready to latch onto almost anything. So many Americans have been attracted of late to trendy, me-first forms of new age religiosity. Even larger numbers have been drawn to the easy, absolutes of rigid fundamentalism. But whether we fall for the flaky, no-demands put-upon-us kind of spiritual junk food, or the everything-be-told-and-decided-for-us kind, we are missing out on what’s truest and best.

I’m afraid we haven’t always been all that persistent in doing our part to nurture all that is our faith inheritance. I find it hard to get used to the fact that the majority of Americans younger than I have had no significant direct contact with the mainline church. I look forward to starting our new Faith Formation class this evening, because the moderate to liberal voice of American Christianity is largely unknown to younger generations now. Even those who got a hefty dose of what the church at its best it all about may still get ‘itching ears’ and start to think over time that gospel demands are too hard, or that the church is too staid and uninspiring. To some, “church” is thought to be passé, passé like the old family farm, like independent journalism, like grassroots participatory democracy.

How are we to stay true to our faith heritage? How are we to remain aligned with the mainline, or with that which is its most solid, creative core? How to stay connected to that great cloud of witnesses who have run this race before us? We’re still being called to a living faith, are we not? God is still speaking, we are a people with a message to convey, a proven faith heritage to pass on. But how are we to not lose heart?

In a series of five Sunday worship services this Fall, and in letters you’ll all soon be receiving, we are revealing some secrets, about keeping the message alive. We’re spilling some beans; telling some not-necessarily each truths. We aren’t holding back, because time seems short, and we mean to adequately pass on our faith heritage. Last Sunday’s secret had to do with GRATITUDE. This week: PERSISTENCE.

“Stick with what you’ve learned and believed,” scripture counsels us; “Keep the message alive. Be persistent at it. Don’t ever quit.” It can hardly be said enough. We always need to be consistent, clear, and disciplined about conveying our faith. And...we need to be, as Paul’s letter to Timothy urged him to be, and like the widow in Jesus’ parable was, quite persistent about it too.

The widow in Jesus’ parable kept coming back to a corrupt and calloused judge with some unspecified concern. She really had no choice. “Widows in Jesus’ day were not allowed to inherit anything, so upon the death of a husband, ‘his’ property was passed to his sons or brothers. But if those male relatives did not act compassionately toward their father or brother’s widow, a judge was called in as the widow’s final and only hope.” (Seasons of the Spirit commentary) Such disputes were quite common. Someone was likely blocking this poor woman’s social security. Maybe she’d already gotten an eviction notice. Maybe her in-laws were on the outs with her, wanting to sell off the old homestead and force her to move prematurely to some first century equivalent to a lousy, stinking nursing home. Maybe she was being denied visitation rights to her grandchildren because their father didn’t approve of her liberal beliefs. Whatever her specific justice concern, this woman refused to give up, and managed to make quite a nuisance of herself.

"A story about a widow with no influence and a judge with no compassion would have been quite familiar ground for Jesus' hearers. And though the widow had no worldly power, her persistence wins the day. Justice does triumph in spite of all odds against it! No wonder the author or Luke's gospel interprets Jesus' story as being about not losing heart!"

Of course, one can be persistent – rigorously disciplined, even – about the wrong kinds of things too. When we don't like what someone's sticking to, we don't say they're persistent. We call them stubborn! Or maybe label them obsessive – compulsive even. Which one is it? Sometimes it's the same persons viewed from different perspectives. Is the current administration in Washington staying on message about this war, or being blindly bullheaded? I think most of you know how I feel. And judges? So many of late have fit the profile drawn by Jesus when he speaks of judges who don't know justice. International law is being ignored and belittled. Secret prisons and torture chambers are being deemed off limits to the constitution. Prisoners held without trial, not even knowing for what they are being held! Recent appointees seem to be like the judge in *Alice in Wonderland*, who clamored out the demand, 'Sentence first! Verdict afterwards!'"

'Staying on message'? What kind of 'message' I wonder, do they think we're conveying to the world. And yet if we're sure of our message we have to stay on message too. We're being called to be persistent. To persevere with the gospel. The corrupt judge in Jesus' parable undoubtedly considers the badgering widow either a bothersome fool or stubborn threat – yet Jesus lifts her up as a model of perseverance.

Luke says the parable is about prayer, and that we should not lose heart at our praying. We shouldn't. But I think persistence at prayer means more than just going up to our rooms and down on our knees. Jesus is primarily pointing out a publicly pestering person, not a privately praying one. This widow is a Mother Jones-like 'pray for the dead, fight like hell for the living' kind of person. This judge, the text says, "never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people either." And yet somehow this poor woman comes across as a threat to him. "She will wear me out!" says the New Revised Standard Version. "She will worry me to death," says the Jerusalem Bible. But in Greek, it literally says, "She will strike me in the eye!" Which is kind of interesting. Apparently the poor of the world got branded as physically-violent terrorists in those days too – even weak little old widows! Meanwhile, the terrorism of the rich gets referred to as 'the justice system.' Jesus says to the poor, to those often unfairly branded by the privileged as terrorists, "Go on, terrify the rich with inconvenient Truth!"

"Look to the widow and her style – this is how justice comes! You will see the Commonwealth of God coming among you when you see the oppressed willing to resist the system and pester it to surrender, willing to risk contempt of court for the praise of God!" Maybe even willing, though I don't take the Greek translation literally, to stick a finger in the eye of an unjust judge. Resist with an equally strong dose of nonviolence. How many of you saw our UCC President, John Thomas, getting arrested last week in front of the white house? Check out the video of it at [ucc.org](http://ucc.org). I think too of the folk singer Pete Seeger, whose banjo has this inscription on it – this machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender! A banjo! "Pester the pawns of the system to exasperation, put down the mighty from their thrones, sic'em and scatter them like the God of Mary in her Magnificat." (Gallop)

This widow was not one to be easily dismissed! She would have been viewed as one who had not kept in her place. Today the powers that be try to keep the activist church in its place too, the church, that is, which resists oppression and offers real hope to the poor. The

church as a whole is widely tolerated as long as we behave, as long as we don't bark, bite, or frown, as long as we're housebroken and dependent.

Separation of church and state is very important, but it was never intended to separate the pulpit from power, piety from reality! Like Rosa Parks sitting down on a bus, the widow says, No, I don't just belong with children, kitchen, and church, I also belong in Court. I also belong where I can confront injustice. I belong where I can wrestle with the powers, the thrones, the dominations.

To not lose heart is to persevere in patience and at prayer. To be patiently at prayer, though, does not mean to be passive. It does not mean one is to bow out of an active struggle. Nonviolent does not mean non active nor does it mean compliant.

It is the vocation of the church to be persistent, and especially when it comes to promoting justice, to never, ever give up.

This church has often stood on the side of widows and outcasts, the disabled and poor. Some years back in another sermon on this text, I said I felt that Broadview Church was being called to assist a refugee family from Afghanistan. We had sponsored refugees before, in the 1950's, a family from Hungary, in post-Vietnam years, refugees from South East Asia. It is our calling, our persistent message to the world, to walk our talk, to show we care, to make a real difference for peace and justice. Just recently, our Church Council learned about how Bethel Ethiopian Church is helping to resettle refugee families now too, many of them, and how much of a strain that has made on their meager resources. They've asked us for help. We have to decide what next steps we might be called to take with them. Maybe as a church community we're not done yet tutoring and training, hiring refugees, hounding authorities, pestering bureaucrats. Be persistent, Broadview Church...We're not done yet

at the prayerful pursuit of peace;  
at pledging our support of this church, week after week, year after year  
in passing on a vibrant faith heritage to the next generation.

Stay the course, don't lose heart, God's will be done. Amen.