

NAG, NAG, NAG

Luke 18:1-8

Is this hope or foolishness? Can persistence in the face of despair equal success? You decide: Charles Lubin enjoyed both eating and making cheesecake. He was pretty good at both. So good that he decided to open a cheesecake store, which he did on the north side of Chicago. It flourished and so he opened a second store in South Chicago. That store did not do so well and eventually, he lost both stores as a result.

Discouraged, he sat in his room one night and while eating his cheesecake, thought “This is pretty good cheesecake!” So he tried again and opened his original store again. Soon, he opened another store, but it failed and he once again lost both stores.

Less than a year later, while eating his cheesecake he said to himself “This is pretty darn good cheesecake!” So he opened his original store — again! But after opening a second store, he went bankrupt.

He tried and failed to open cheesecake stores a fourth time. Then he had an idea. He made great cheesecake, and he wanted to open another store, but this time he decided to name his cheesecakes after his daughter, Sara Lee. It became the largest bakery in the world.

Persistence is the act of being persistent. Persistent – is refusing to give up or let go; persevering obstinately. Charles Lubin was indeed persistent, long after any average person would have given up. The widow in our text from the Gospel of Luke this morning was persistent. Jesus tells this story as a way to encourage his followers never to lose heart where prayer is concerned. He uses an interesting, if not more than a little humorous story of a very, very persistent widow who was determined to get the attention of a judge who could care less about her situation. More than that really, he did not even have respect for God. Perhaps you have met this person in your life, someone who is more concerned with their own interests – it is ALL about them and their needs!

So here is this widow who has nothing – no husband, no inheritance and no social standing – in other words, she really has nothing to lose. So she sets out to become the judge’s worst nightmare, hounding him at the courthouse, following him home, camping out under his bedroom window, until the judge finally relents and says, “All right, already, I will give you what you want if you will just stop talking and leave me alone.

Persistence. But this story has more than just the stubborn determination of one very indignant widow – because her persistence reminds me of the persistence of God. This story in the Gospel of Luke is about God as much as it is about us. Anyone who has ever prayed their hearts out knows what it is to feel like the widow in this story. We have prayed and prayed, and it just seems that our prayers go up as high as the ceiling and somehow go no further. We have begged with God to answer our hearts' desires and too often it seems like our prayers fall on deaf ears.

This is where we need to be reminded of the character of God. Like the widow in Jesus’ parable, God has a persistent, unshakeable, everlasting love where all living creatures are concerned. Human beings have been abusing this love of God since the beginning of time – something we still are guilty of today, but God is so persistently in love with us, God’s love is

so unshakeable that we can trust God to bring about justice. We can be sure God hears our prayers, our crying day and night, even though we may not see any results... yet. God has not forgotten us, and God does not delay long in helping us. Of course, you and I grow impatient, losing heart and hope. And this is where the persistence of the faithful enters into this story.

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor has written a sermon on this passage in Luke... she called it "Bothering God." In her sermon, she tells the story of her seven-year-old step-granddaughter who refused to make a wish while blowing out the candles on her birthday cake. "I don't know why I keep doing this, my wishes never come true. Last year I wished my best friend would not move away but she did. This year, I want to wish that my mommy and daddy will get back together again..." Her mother reassured her that was NOT going to happen, so little Madeline decided that birthday wishes had about as much chance coming true as pigs would ever be able to fly. This jaded view of wishing disturbed Barbara Brown Taylor for in it she likened her granddaughter's wishing to prayer... particularly when our prayers do not seem to be heard by God. Barbara then remembered this passage from Luke and knew she had an answer for her granddaughter when the day would come for her to question Barbara if prayer really works. Using the persistence of the widow and the obstinate judge it becomes obvious to Barbara that it is okay to "nag" God in prayer. To quote Barbara, "... prayer works because it keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart. It is how we bother God and it is how God bothers us back. In other words... feel free to Nag, Nag, Nag God because God is nagging us right back seeking to make us become his beloved.

Granted, our prayers are not always answered in the way we want them to be. When we pray most, if not all people, see answered prayer as the fulfillment of a specific request. We want to find that perfect job, the perfect spouse, financial security...but we also sit by the bedside of a loved one praying for a cure in this life that does not happen. Oh make no mistake; God answers these prayers for healing, just not quite the way we want or in this lifetime. Unfortunately, in our society today, people want to believe that God will intercede at our urging and like Santa Clause grant us our heart's desire, and this theory has been supported by what some clergy call the "Prosperity gospel."

A few years back there was a small book making the rounds with Christians. It was called, The Prayer of Jabez, perhaps you have heard of it. The Prayer of Jabez is based on a passage from 1 Chronicles 4:10 where a man named Jabez prayed, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my borders, that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm. Well, God complied with this request and on the basis of this story in 1 Chronicles some twenty-first-century Christians are persuaded that God has unclaimed blessings for us, that God wants us to be selfish in our prayers, that it is appropriate to ask God to increase the value of your 401K, and that God will open the storehouse of heaven if you pray persistently, like the widow in today's passage.

Your pastor, in fact, all pastors, who have a daily experience with dear faithful people who pray heartfelt prayers persistently, only to have their prayers go unfulfilled, knows how theologically wrong and tragically misleading the current prosperity gospel is. You have heard me touch upon this in the past, but I cannot emphasize enough that when the consequences of our faith

are worldly goods, even good health and the avoidance of everything unpleasant in life today, we have turned religion into a service-station of self-gratification and churches into health clubs. This is in direct opposition to what God has intended for our individual faith journey. God wants to take our wants, our desires, etc. out of the center and put God's desires smack dab in the middle of life. The issue in this passage from Luke is both persistence in prayer and justice, not using God to get what we want. The widow actively sought justice from the uncaring judge, and God answered her prayer.

In this morning's Epistle from 2 Timothy, Paul gives Timothy some final instructions which can seem as if Paul is nagging him a bit listen to verse 2: *Preach the word. Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Correct, confront, and encourage with patience and instruction.* Verse 3 almost sounds as if Paul had a direct line to the Prosperity Gospel – *There will come a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. They will collect teachers who say what they want to hear because they are self-centered.* In *Feasting on the Word*, Olive Elaine Hinnant, adjunct professor at Santa Fe College, makes an interesting link of these ancient words to our present day, *"In these postmodern times, there are plenty of inspired teachers writing books and offering seminars on spiritual matters. The gospel gets buried among the "new" messages. Books such as The Purpose-Driven Life, The Prayer of Jabez, and A New Earth: Awakening Your Life's Potential create a frenzy of excitement with their promises of a "new" being and a "new" start.* Hinnant strongly cautions that good preachers will help make the connection between these contemporary writings and God's Word in the Bible making certain that people are fully aware that the bottom line is our faith in Christ and God's grace alone that satisfies our longings. (*Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4, page 184*). Hinnant does not suggest that people should not read these books because they could indeed encourage a person in their faith journey. These writings may be reaching people who do not attend church and never will. Hinnant is only calling our attention to the truth that unless we connect these writings to the Gospel message – we are indeed substituting secular writings for Biblical truths. This is the very thing Paul cautions Timothy about in verses 3 and 4.

This week, I am sending you home with an assignment; homework if you will. It is this – I would like each of you to pay attention to where you see God acting in your life, or in the life of friends and family. God is everywhere and in everything we do. Sadly, though, too many people only see evidence of God's presence in their lives when God gives them what they want. In doing so, they miss all the times God speaks to us through the sunrise and sunset (right Warren?); or the wonder of a new-born calf or horse struggling to stand up for the first time.

When we put parameters on how we want to see God acting in our life, we miss the little nuances of God's love in the hug of a child; a Dad or Mom who shows up for every sports event or school event of their child; even that stranger in the hospital waiting room that makes conversation with you making the endless time of waiting for news from the operating room move along at a faster pace.

This week, pay close attention to where you see God in your life, in your day to day living. It can be in the person who lets you take the parking spot you were both gunning for. It can be in the grubby sticky hand of your child or grandchild bringing you a treasure to share – a bunch of

wilted dandelions or a rock that looks as though it has gold in it. Or we can look tragedy squarely in the face and refuse to believe God has abandoned us.

On a vacation trip to Williamsburg, Virginia, to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary, Roy and Karen Pike from Columbus, Ohio, slammed into a tractor-trailer parked along the shoulder of the road and were killed instantly. Their three sons, aged 20, 17 and 16, were left behind to open anniversary cards and sympathy cards the same day, to turn roses sent for celebration into memorial flowers, to take their first steps into adulthood by selecting caskets and burial spaces for their parents, as Timothy Forbes, the minister who conducted their funeral service, put it. Yet 17-year-old Kevin Pike, who handled all the burial arrangements for his parents, testified before the memorial service how he was experiencing God amidst the tragedy. Right now, he confessed to Forbes, I see God as my shelf; everything on it has been moved around, changed or broken and I know that it is always going to be different and changing, more now than ever before. But the shelf that I can put everything on hasn't changed. God is still the same. In Forbes' words to that packed church: God is our shelf that we can put our lives upon, and no matter how rearranged it becomes, God will sustain us.

Persistence. Nag, nag, nag...to leave you with one more picture of persistence, you may find yourself in these examples. Persistence is the husband and wife who refuse to accept their inability to have children and along with prayer, chase down every infertility specialist in their area. Persistence is the child who struggled to read standing before a crowded auditorium giving a speech as class valedictorian. Persistence is the man who against all odds not only graduates college but becomes a doctor. Persistence is a husband and wife whose marriage once seemed to be on the rocks, celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary. This week notice where you have seen God in your life...also finish this sentence: "Nag, Nag, Nag...Persistence is...!" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen