

Perseverance in challenging times. The determination to seek and follow God’s ways, to pursue right relationship with others and with ourselves. Boldness and vulnerability. Endurance. These seem to be some of the qualities that emerge from the characters in our Scripture readings this morning.

I think that we have to persevere in some way at least once a day; sometimes just getting up can be difficult. There can be little irritations, setbacks, obstacles, annoying or uncooperative people...all sorts of things that call upon our perseverance and stamina. The ways in which we navigate the small daily challenges give us a good idea of how we will persevere through the big ones. And every seemingly minor encounter or incident can strengthen us for whatever lies ahead.

In the past week or two, in what situation or with what person have you called upon your store of perseverance and determination?

When I thought about my recent vacation, I had to laugh about perseverance during the first week. Steve and I were in England, with Steve driving. Yes, we had to persevere with determination through a zillion roundabouts, or rotaries. I can’t understand how one country can possibly have so many intersections! One morning we counted 7 roundabouts in a row, each under a mile from the next one. The GPS would tell us the exit number, then Steve and I would both count out loud: 1, 2, 3... It’s this one, Steve! No, Ruth, it doesn’t look right! After taking an exit, we would wait in great suspense. Would we hear directions for the next roundabout or the dreaded word: “recalculating?” And yet, the saving grace of roundabouts is that, well, they’re roundabouts, so you can go around as many times as you like until you find the right path..

During the second week, unfortunately, both Steve and I got sick, and you all know the spirit of endurance we must call upon during illness, even a temporary one. I was surprised, however, by how much reflecting I did when I was in that half-asleep, half-awake state. Memories and ideas popped up, even a few clear thoughts about church that I held onto in the hope of remembering them! I also gave thanks for the healing properties of hot tea and toast.

Well, these two minor challenges, which always feel major in the moment, are not in the same realm of significance as the struggles that faced Jacob in the Book of Genesis and the widow in Jesus’ parable.

Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebecca. As the younger son, he had to make his own way, but Jacob confronted and persevered through obstacles by deceiving, manipulating and tricking others, including his father and older brother Esau. Up to this point, Jacob’s life has been all about himself, stealing a blessing and a birthright, building up his own little world with possessions, wives and children. He’s also been on the run. But at Now, he knows how lost he is and that it is time to stop. Alone in the night, he cannot sleep peacefully because the next morning, he will face his brother after all these years.

And a man wrestles with Jacob until daybreak, an angel of God, or God in human form. If it is a dream (or a nightmare), it is a very real experience in mind, body and soul. You know that feeling upon waking from a dream? **God wants to engage with Jacob.** Vulnerable and bold, Jacob responds by fighting for his life, wrestling with who he has been and who he is called to be, wrestling with his relationships, with fear and guilt, with questions and doubts about the greater purpose of his life (1).

He not only perseveres, he also prevails, although the man gives him one final blow on the hip. But winning is no longer enough for Jacob. He keeps holding on to the man for dear life. *I will not let you go*, he says, *unless you bless me*. Jacob is insistent in demanding a divine affirmation of his worth, his identity and his purpose for the future. When have you been so bold in prayer? In this culture, names were considered to hold great power and meaning. And so Jacob must first speak and claim his name, who he is now and all that he has been, before he receives a new name, one that he doesn't yet understand, for it is so much bigger than him, it is so far outside his own little world, it reaches out to future generations: the name Israel. The man says: *For you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.*

Jacob still holds on. *Please tell me your name.* In the mysterious realm of the unconscious, he doesn't yet comprehend with whom he has been wrestling. Understanding will come in the morning, when he goes to meet his brother not only with a blessing but also with a limp.

Is this a God who actively invites our persistence and intensity? Yes, this is a God who *wants* to engage with us, a God we can come at with the whole weight of our thoughts, questions, and feelings. That's a God worth pursuing, don't you think? That's a God I won't let go of. Wrestling, as it turns out, is not a bad or even a scary thing, because it's the opposite of apathy, the opposite of resignation. It may even be the opposite of loneliness. To wrestle is to be alive and still in the game. But it seems that God delights in those who dare to wrestle with the divine. If Jacob's experience is any indication, then God rejoices when we strive to prevail over obstacles. We are changed, our perception expands and our understanding deepens of the greater purpose to which God is always calling us (1).

And a blessing goes with us as we move each day into the future.

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In Jesus' parable, we move from the privacy of Jacob's wrestling to the public domain, where a widow is pursuing an unjust judge. She too is fighting for her life, for as a widow, she is most likely destitute. *Grant me justice against my opponent*, she asks and pleads and demands again and again. She may have no social or political power, but she is a force unto herself. She hounds this judge to give her the justice she needs and deserves. She's at his front door when he leaves for work, she finds him at lunch time, she follows him home and camps outside. Everyone sees her and hears her. She has nothing to lose.

But the judge, who neither fears God nor has respect for people, is embarrassed and exasperated. He sees her as a pesky gnat disrupting his own little self-satisfied world. Finally, in spite of himself, he gives her justice, just to get rid of her. He is too arrogant and rigid to have a change of heart, to recognize her as worthy or her cause as just.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of people like him. There are also times when it is wise to let go and pursue other strategies or possibilities. And there are certainly times when justice is not granted no matter how long and hard a person tries.

But that is not the way of our God, who urges and guides us in our determination to see that what is wrong is made right, that broken hearts be healed and those who despair be restored into community. Prevailing doesn't always mean winning in the way that our society understands it. Prevailing has to do with strength of character, with perseverance, boldness and vulnerability, endurance in our journey with God and one another.

*Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. And at the end of our reading, Jesus asks: And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

Yes, I believe he will, for faith is in the asking, in the demanding for a blessing and for justice, in the wrestling with challenges and hard questions, in the persistent search for understanding and right relationship, in our persevering for a greater purpose in service to God and one another. Friends, keep on praying and asking God for what you and our world so desperately need. Persevere in demanding honesty, compassion and righteousness of yourself and others. Take risks that expose your vulnerability. Be bold in confronting every obstacle, whether it be as small as a confusing roundabout or as big as a broken relationship.

Every week, I see and hear about your commitment to our ministries and vision as a church and to your own spiritual growth. Through the news and pen pals, we are learning about the perseverance of the Checheche congregation in prayer, in times of drought and political oppression. Since we live so far away from Zimbabwe and mail is slow, we know that this partnership will take perseverance and patience on both sides. May we keep on growing our circle of relationships deeper and wider.

Let be persistent in keeping our hearts and minds open to God's grace. Remember Jacob and the widow. Remember Jesus. Hope and trust in God, and may the blessing of God go with you. Amen.

## **NOTES**

(1) Thomas, Debie. "Sunday's Coming," Christian Century Magazine, October 2016.