

Sermon: "Hanging in There"

An elderly lady was well-known for her faith and for her boldness in talking about it. She would stand on her front porch and shout "PRAISE THE LORD! Next door to her lived an atheist who would get so angry at her proclamations he would shout, "There ain't no Lord!!

Hard times set in on the elderly lady, and she prayed for GOD to send her some assistance. She stood on her porch and shouted "PRAISE THE LORD. GOD I NEED FOOD!! I AM HAVING A HARD TIME. PLEASE LORD, SEND ME SOME GROCERIES!!"

The next morning the lady went out on her porch and noted a large bag of groceries and shouted, "PRAISE THE LORD."

The neighbor jumped from behind a bush and said, "Aha! I told you there was no Lord. I bought those groceries, God didn't." The lady started jumping up and down and clapping her hands and said, "PRAISE THE LORD. God not only sent me groceries, but made the devil pay for them. Praise the Lord!"

Have you ever become discouraged about anything? Just wanted to give up? Been in a situation where you had tried everything and nothing seemed to be working? What kinds of things do you get frustrated or discouraged by? Perhaps it is the world situation and wonder how that could possibly ever get resolved? Perhaps you are worried and frustrated about declining health? Perhaps you are discouraged and worried about your children or grandchildren? Perhaps you have concerns and longings about a relationship? Perhaps you have set a goal and it seems a long way off and you get discouraged? Someone once said to me that if you really want to know someone, then, ask what it is they pray for because that will tell you what it is they truly desire.

Prayers are the hopes and deep longings of a person. And sometimes it seems that those prayers, those hopes, those desires, those longings, those desperations will never be answered and we become disheartened.

In our scriptures this morning we have people who are discouraged and frustrated....in our first story the disciples are frustrated because they don't see any evidence of the kingdom of God that Jesus talked about coming...they are hoping and praying for the kingdom of justice and equality, the kingdom of compassion and inclusion and healing to appear and they are becoming disheartened, wondering when it will come and so Jesus says to them, don't lose heart, let me tell you a parable about a widow who didn't give up. In the other passage, the father is frustrated because the disciples of Jesus don't seem able to heal his son of epilepsy. And Jesus is also highly frustrated because his disciples are having difficulty healing anyone without him.

I love the humanity of Jesus that we glimpse in this second story when his frustration bubbles over. Jesus and Peter and James and John have just returned from this amazing spiritual experience when they have been up on the mountain and been chatting with the dead. Elijah and Moses have appeared giving Jesus some encouragement for what he is about to face in Jerusalem and they get down to the bottom of the mountain on this big spiritual high only to hear about how the rest of the disciples haven't been able to heal a young boy with epilepsy. This poor boy's seizures are so severe that he has fallen into the cooking fires at home and has almost drowned and is a real threat to himself. And so the father has returned with his son to Jesus hoping that he will be able to heal his son even though his disciples couldn't. And Jesus turns to the disciples in sheer frustration over their lack of faith in themselves and says: How long must I be with you people? How much longer do I have to put up with you?

Ever feel like that? As good as Jesus was, he too experienced the frustration that comes with human existence, those days when we become discouraged and wonder if things will ever change for the better.

But there is loads of encouragement in both these stories about how we humans are not to give up hope in the midst of desperate and difficult and seemingly impossible situations. Jesus tells the disciples the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow to encourage them not to give up or lose heart. He reminds them that we will always encounter unjust judges in our lives. There will always be people who don't have respect for God or for other people that we might have to be up against, like the Donald Trumps or the Kim Jong Uns or self-centered difficult people who always seem to have some measure of control over our lives. Like the persistent widow who was up against difficult people on both sides, her adversary in court and the judge at the bench but that doesn't mean she gave up. She kept coming and kept coming and kept coming to the unjust judge for justice and she refused to give up on herself or the situation until justice prevailed. And finally the judge gave justice to her, NOT because it was the right thing to do or because he had compassion on her or because he thought God cared how he administered justice. The unjust judge only gave her what she wanted because it served him to do so.

Jesus is reminding us that we should never give up on the things we truly believe in, because unlike the unjust judge, God is on our side, God is on our side when we are on the side of the right and good, and God wants what is best for us. Jesus is not saying that God is like the unjust judge, and so we just have to pester God long enough to get what we want.

Jesus is saying have faith because unlike the unjust judge, our God hears our cries and has great compassion and is immediate in response to our needs, but its people we have to be persistent with.

Jesus is saying when we become short on patience and faith, as much as we are tempted, don't give up on the things that truly matter to us. Have persistence and

patience in the face of impossible situations. In our second story, when the disciples ask why they couldn't heal the man's son he tells them that their inability lacks from a faith in themselves and that even if they had a faith in God and in themselves, the size of a tiny mustard seed, they could move mountains and accomplish the impossible. The word confidence from the Latin means "with faith" – *con* meaning "with" and *fidel* meaning "faith" so to be confident is to have faith in ourselves, to believe in ourselves, to have trust in ourselves and our own power and abilities.

When we lack confidence, we lack faith in ourselves. The disciples couldn't heal the boy of epilepsy because they didn't have faith in themselves to do so. Neither the boy nor the father lacked faith. In fact, the father's faith made him persistent and when the disciples couldn't heal his son, he went to Jesus himself. It was the disciples who didn't believe in themselves. The widow who had no power, no status in that society, believed in herself and in the rightness of her situation enough to keep going up to the unjust judge, over and over and over again and in time she received what was right. It was her faith in herself and in the good that finally prevailed. It was the father's persistence that helped to heal his son.

And that is so true isn't it...impossible things happen when people refuse to give up, when they have faith...who ever thought that the Berlin wall would come down between East and West Germany...but down it finally came – why? Because of the persistence of people who did not give up on their dream and what was right. Who ever thought we would see Kim Jong Un in conversations with South Korea about working together, it's nothing short of a miracle but the day has come and not because it is the right thing to do. Like the unjust judge, I don't think Kim Jong Un has respect for either God or people, he's talking to South Korea because it serves him to do so; because people in North and South Korea and people around the world have persistently prayed and petitioned and put pressure on North Korea for peace between their sister countries.

People like my friend Karen who has stage 4 ovarian cancer is still alive after 2 and ½ years of treatment because she has been persistently believing, having faith in God and in herself that she can overcome cancer and she is. Rich Parsons has been through hell and back with his health, and is home because of his sheer persistence and faith in God and in himself to heal. Against impossible odds, these people can move mountains and make the impossible, possible.

Now don't think for one minute that I am saying that when people don't heal, or when people die from terrible disease or putting up with terrible situations that its their fault or that Jesus is saying they don't have enough faith....sometimes people don't heal. Please don't think that this or other stories in scripture are saying that you're your own fault if you don't heal or others don't change...that would be taking these stories out of context. These stories are not saying that when we don't heal its our fault because our faith is too small. These stories are not about dying as a failure in living. There are far worst things than dying. Sometimes dying is the final healing for those who are very sick. Dying is the route home to God when we are finished

what we came to do. These stories simply remind us that when we are up against seemingly impossible situations -- have a little faith in ourselves, refuse to give up, be a thorn in someone's flesh, and things will eventually change.

There was a woman I know who found out her husband of 30 years was having an affair and had asked his wife for a divorce. And unlike most people who would be devastated and discouraged and feel rejected and tearfully give up, she refused to give him a divorce. She told him, not happening. You're not going to see that woman anymore, we're going to counseling and we are not giving up on this relationship and our family. She refused to take no for an answer. And they just celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary. Now I have no idea if they are happy or not, that's not my point. I just know they are still together because she was persistent and had faith in herself and what she believed was right. When we believe in ourselves, when we trust in ourselves, when we have faith, even the size of a mustard seed, so small we can't even see it sometimes, then what seems impossible, can become possible.

Jesus reminds us today that followers of the Way of Jesus are encouraged not to give up, that while we might grow frustrated with people or situations sometimes like Jesus and say, oh how long must I be with you people.... That we are not to lose heart, but have a little faith and a lot of persistence and patience and eventually, eventually what you believe is true and right, the good, will prevail.

You see, in the heavenly dimensions, the good is immediate, healing is immediate, God's will is quickly done. Where we live, in this earthly dimension, God's will works more slowly, not because God is slow, Jesus is clear, God answers quickly and wants the good to prevail but it takes way more physical effort to bring about justice and healing in this world. So in this dimension, good results are not always immediate, so we have to have a little faith and a whole lot of persistence and patience to make the good become reality.

I have a poem that my dear cousin Cath gave me that I turn to in times of frustration that I offer you this morning for your encouragement...

People can be unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.

Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.

The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.

People favour underdogs but follow only top dogs. Stand up for some underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

Persistence and faith in yourself and faith in the goodness of God, that's the way of the followers and leaders of Jesus. May it be so.

Amen.