

Persistence

In a recent Epistle I wrote about going out for a walk on weekday afternoons. For the most part I've been going downtown for the exercise of walking back up the hill to Trinity. I've also gone in the other direction toward Vander Veer Park. During the time I taught at St. Ambrose University, I used to walk or bike through that park almost daily. Over twenty-six years of teaching, the trees in Vander Veer taught me a lot about persistence in the midst of seasonal change. By their age they also helped to give me a much longer perspective of time. One of my favorites is a small, unassuming tree called the dawn redwood that has a tongue-twister of a Latin name (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), It was thought to have become extinct millions of years ago until it was found growing in a mountainous province of China in 1944. Now it is planted everywhere. Talk about persistence!

Persistence of people, not trees, is at the heart of our Gospel reading this week. It's a curious passage. Like a lot of Luke's parables, it can be a head-scratcher. We're introduced to a judge without scruples or integrity. He neither fears God nor respects people. Perhaps over time he has become cynical through the use of power. It's clear that he's not likely to pay any attention to the widow who pesters him.

The widow is undeterred. What does she have to lose? She is already in a powerless position in society; the only power she has is her persistence. Eventually the judge yields in spite of his refusal to fear God or respect anyone. But why? Following the time-honored King James Version, our translation suggests that she is wearing him down by her persistence. The original Greek is more ambiguous because it uses a word that literally means to slap someone in the face. That's a hint that the judge might be shamed by refusing her. She is giving him a bad name. So he grants her request.

Jesus implies that the disciples should be as persistent in praying as the widow was in petitioning. After all, will not God, who *is* just, answer more quickly than the unjust judge? Do not lose heart, Jesus says. Keep praying. He thinks they're likely to give up, which appears to be the meaning of "will the [Son of Man] find faith on earth?"

Continuing to pray is all well and good, but what about those who find that their prayers are not answered? Jesus himself knew what that was like. At Gethsemane he prayed to God that the suffering he was about to undergo might be taken away from him. The key is what he said next. "Yet not my will but thine be done," he concluded (Luke 22:42). Jesus knew God answers prayer, but the answer may not be what's desired or expected.

That's why the long view is important. It not only provides perspective; it promotes persistence. Jeremiah certainly had the long view. Last week he told the exiles in Babylonia to expect to be there a long time. Today he sees a future when a new covenant will be made that will be graven on the hearts of the people, when all will know the Lord, from the least of them to the greatest. In the letter to Timothy we also hear the admonition to be persistent whether the times are favorable or unfavorable. Jesus told us in his parable that God will most certainly vindicate his people. The question is, will they remain faithful and prayerful?

My tree friends in Vander Veer have gained some girth over the years, as have I. This time of year the leaves are changing color, and soon both the dawn redwood and the bald cypress will lose their needles, an odd characteristic for conifers. By spring, though, they will be green once again. The cycle of life is a persistent one, and those trees have followed it for many, many years. I only hope that I can be just as persistent in my prayer life, as I make my petitions to God for justice, mercy, and grace.

[Pentecost 19: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8.]