

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 10/21/07
Scripture: Luke 18: 1-8

“Don’t Let It Go!”

A story: several years ago a man named Courtney Garton found himself in a sad place that many in our world occupy these days. He was the newly divorced dad of two middle school daughters. He worried about this new part-time parenting and living situation, the girls having to pack up suitcases and travel to stay with him two school nights per week and every other weekend. Garton was determined to not let the brokenness of his family diminish or change the love he felt for his kids, and they for him. He promised himself that consistently, regularly and persistently, persistently, he would let his girls know just how much he loved them and not just on special occasions like a birthday or Christmas, but every, every day, and so he began a neat family tradition. He made the girls their school lunches and so tucked inside each lunch bag for the day, every school day he placed a silly or serious or sassy but always heartfelt poem, rhyming notes, written on napkins, reflecting the ups and downs of everyday life, notes that maintained the lines of communication even when times were tough. Some poems were playful: "The woods are full of trees/ The sky is full of clouds/ But do something for me please, / Don't play your music so louds! Love, Dad." Some poems were straight from the heart: "There was once a mean old dad, Who wouldn't let his daughter be free. The daughter got mad, The father got sad. That's the tale so far, you see, For that mean old dad is me. Love me, Love me not, Dad."

These lunch box love notes continued day by day, week by week, year by year. When Garton’s youngest prepared to go off to college, she handed him a box with 150 carefully preserved yellow napkins. For you see, she had carefully saved every single note, every last one and so Garton’s dogged and determined efforts to love his girls, to be there for his girls, to be the best Dad he could, it had paid off.

Because he was persistent, persistent in his familial and fatherly love. I bet there were some mornings that the last thing he felt like doing was penning another love note. Some days he was so angry with or disappointed in his daughters, he was tempted to hold back, maybe skip just today. But he didn't. He persisted.

Persistence: the virtue of sticking to it, even, especially when we want to throw up our hands and just give up. Persistence: a blue collar kind of spiritual gift that stays when every one else leaves, that hangs in when the world says “Let go”, that arises bleary-eyed from bed before dawn when we’d like nothing better than to hit the snooze alarm and pull the blankets back over our eyes. Persistence: it is not very sexy or flashy, it won’t make the eleven o’clock news or win many awards but persistence: this virtue, my friends, is largely what makes a life, a faith, a family, a church, anything, everything that truly matters.

Persistence: like that persistent widow in Jesus’ parable who will just not let that judge off the hook until he gives her justice. Though it is not said what kind of justice she seeks, it probably had to do with money, an inheritance from her late husband. In that time widows had absolutely no legal or social standing in the community, so when her husband died, a son or an uncle would automatically get the cash, the home, the livestock, everything. A widows’ lot was left to the capricious whims of male relatives.

And this widow was being cheated somehow, ignored, forgotten. But instead of rolling over, slinking away, she won't let go. She is persistent.

As Duke University Chaplain Reverend William Willimon comments, "This judge is probably a sleazy jurist, put in his position through some political shenanigans. This poor widow, without political protection, totally powerless, what hope does she have before this judge's bench? [Not much but]...She does have one thing. She has the ability to pester. Leaving messages on his answering machine, constantly banging on his door, giving him no peace — she is persistent. Finally the judge says to himself, 'Even though I could care less about God and can't stand humanity, I will give this woman what she wants, just to get her out of my hair.'"

Persistence: she wins not because of any great talent, not because she's hired Alan Dershowitz to defend her, but simply because she won't back off, she won't go away. She is determined, she is dogged, she is persistent.

I love this parable because it reminds us that though we might wish otherwise, in most of life there are no shortcuts. There are no backdoors. There are no secret formulas or quick detours to realize what we most desire in life. But we humans still try to find these, don't we?

In professional sports—what is the illegal use of steroids by athletes but an effort to quickly leap ahead of all those other poor shmoees who have to grind it out every day, every game? I'll just take this substance and get ahead! We've see it in the collapse of the home mortgage market—why should a future homeowner have to actually save up a big down payment and make enough money to purchase a home? No: shift some figures here, fudge some calculations there and voila—millions who would never have been able to buy a house, did so, a miracle but that house of cards comes crashing down under the weight of corporate greed and unwitting buyers. We can even see it in faith: look at the bestseller lists and there is always some new book, some new miracle spiritual formula to get us to God in the fast lane with some slick and easy answers. This season the latest flavor of such a book is "The Secret" by Danielle Byrne which has been on USA Today's top 50 list for almost a year, sold hundreds of thousands of copies, featured on Oprah—its got buzz and in two years or less I'll be able to pick up a copy in the discount rack at Barnes and Nobles for \$5. The point—there is no secret to faith or God or life or joy or happiness or meaning other than simple persistence and hard work.

Saying grace with our kids around the dinner table and naming something we thank God for even, especially on the days we don't feel very thankful. Piling our children into the car and going to church even, especially, on those Sundays when what we all we most want to do is just sleep late. Staying focused during the sermon even, especially when the preacher is boring—not today of course! Serving that meal to a homeless person at the Salvation Army even, especially when we wonder if the poor will always be with us.

Persistence in faith: one of the spiritual traits of Pilgrim Church that's just amazed me is the doggedness of your faith these past seven years as this institution has been through so much change and challenge and upheaval. You've hung in, you've kept the faith. You've persisted.

So—if you are the widow this day, where do you need God to buck you up, to back you up and to give you the commitment to hang in, to hang on, to push through, and to have faith? A relationship that's hurting—God give me the strength to not just walk

away. Unemployment: God give me the strength to keep searching, keep connecting, keep hoping. A problem child: God give me the passion to love my kid on the days I struggle with even liking her! An unanswered prayer: God give me the fortitude to pray without ceasing, to trust that you hear me and that you will respond.

Persistence—it pays off. Just ask the Boston Red Sox and their millions of fans this morning! As a United Technologies Corporation newspaper advertisement once proclaimed, “ You've failed many times. And although you may not remember you fell down the first time you tried to walk. You almost drowned the first time you tried to swim. Didn't you? Did you hit the ball the first time you swung a bat? Heavy hitters, the ones who hit the most home runs, also strike out a lot. R. H. Macy failed seven times before his store in New York caught on. English novelist, John Creasey got 753 rejection slips before he published 564 books. Babe Ruth struck out 1,330 times but also hit 714 home runs. Don't worry about failure. Worry about the chances you miss when you don't even try.”

So God help us in our persistence—day by day, week by week, year by year. Like the widow may be have he courage and the faith to keep on keeping on. God: give us a faith, a life of persistence. Let all God's people say, “Amen!”

Luke 18:1-5(from "The Message" by Eugene Peterson)

The author of Luke is speaking to an audience that is beginning to lose faith about God's work and presence in the world. They pray but they are losing heart that their prayers are not being heard. So Jesus tells them the Story of the Persistent Widow....

"Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. He said, 'There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!' He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.'" Then the Master said, "Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?"