

**“The Insistence of Persistence”**

Every year, the legendary British Prime Minister Winston Churchill visited Harrow School to sing the traditional songs he had sung there as a boy. The visits continued until the year he died in 1961. On October 29, 1941, he spoke to the students, and the speech became the most quoted and most distorted speech Sir Winston ever delivered.

The myth is that Churchill stood at the podium and said, "Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, give in. Never give in. Never give in. Never give in." Then he sat down. I used this the version of the story in a sermon several years ago. I've since discovered that it didn't happen that way. Churchill's words were *similar* to those quoted, but they were spoken within the text of a full speech. Also, contrary to the source I consulted, he didn't say, "Never give up." He said, "Never give in."

Let the public record show that I unknowingly contributed to the distortion of Churchill's words in order to enhance a sermon. I am sorry. But I'm not *that* sorry. "Never give up." "Never give in." What's the difference? He could have just as easily said:

**“Never quit.”**

**“Stay the course.”**

**“Don't give up the ship.”**

**“Don't throw in the towel.”**

**“Don't give an inch.”**

**“Never surrender.”**

**“If at first you don't succeed, try, try again, and again, and again.”**

**Persistence is not just a way to get what we want. It is the only way to get what we need. Never mind that Al Einstein defined**

insanity as “doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.” We know that when it comes to the things that matter in life, persistence is a priority and endurance is everything.

Jesus told the disciples a parable that at first, probably made them laugh. In one corner of the ring was a little old widow lady with an axe to grind. In the other corner was a pitiful excuse for a judge. The disciples stopped snickering, however, when Jesus said the parable was about prayer and the need to keep at it without losing heart. They listened closely because they had problems with prayer... the problems we have with it still. “How do we do it? How do we stay at it? Why should we keep on praying when nothing changes?”

They understood that the biggest obstacle to prayer was the lack of tangible results. But Jesus told them to *pray always* and not lose heart. The Christian life is not a 100-yard dash. It is a marathon. Marathon runners condition themselves to conserve, control and expend their energy over the long haul to finish the race. The race of life that we run is long and grueling and we must be spiritually fit to run it.

Jesus introduces us to a widow who is prepared to do whatever is necessary to get what she deserves. Judges were under a special obligation prescribed by the Torah to help people beneath the bottom rung of society’s ladder. They were advocates for those who had no advocates. In the case of the widow, she could not inherit her deceased husband’s assets. It all went to either her sons or brothers in law who were supposed to let her live off of it. The fact that she came to the judge alone tells us her family turned her out without a penny to her name.

Pleading before a judge was her only chance at justice, and the one she got was a pathetic excuse for a judge. He could have cared less about God, the Torah didn’t mean diddly to him, and he couldn’t stand the daily parade of people who stood before his bench. He was not the kind of judge who would make it on Court TV.

He kept refusing the widow's plea, but she wasn't going to take no for an answer. She created a daily disturbance in his courtroom shouting, "Give me justice! Give me justice!" She camped out at the door to his chambers and slid notes under the door. She carried a protest sign up and down the sidewalk in front of his house. At the first light of dawn she was beneath his bedroom window shouting, "Get up and give me justice!" He slapped a restraining order on her, but not even that kept her from badgering the judge day and night.

Finally, she broke him. The judge said, "I'm not into justice. I don't give a hoot about God or his law, and I'm sick of all these sniveling, groveling pathetic excuses for human beings begging at my bench, 'Give me this,' and 'Give me that.' I'm just in it for the money, so I'll give her what she wants just to get her out of my hair." Her insistence was greater than his resistance. And Jesus said, "Listen to the judge... Will God not grant justice to his chosen ones who cry out day and night?"

There you have it-- Jesus' counsel on the necessity of prayer and not losing heart. So, what do we take from it that will help us pray persistently and not falter in our faith? First, Jesus is not saying that God is a cosmic crank and that we must pester God into granting our requests. Jesus is not saying that our little concerns will have to wait while God addressing bigger concerns. This idea is reflected in a piece I read this week on a satirical website:

**HEAVEN—***Explaining that He had been "absolutely swamped," God announced yesterday that He was finally able to find time in His busy schedule to answer a portion of the 1995 and 1996 prayer backlog.*

*"Unfortunately, I don't really want a red wagon anymore," 18-year-old Morgantown, WV resident Zach Gilpin said. (from: The Onion)*

We have many questions about prayer. The hardest have to do with the delay between our prayer and God's response. We pray with all the conviction we can muster for the healing of a loved

one, and it doesn't come, at least not in a way we can discern. People keep praying that their churches will be communities of change and growth and transformation, but the Holy Spirit is resisted for the sake of staying the course. People spend their lives praying for peace. Meanwhile we fight an unjust war with no end in sight while plans for the next one are on the drawing board. Parents pray for their children to make the right choices, but they continue on a self-destruct mode. We pray to God that justice be given to the least who need it most. Meanwhile governments say the poor have never had it better, and we know better. We pray and pray that things will get better. We know we don't have God's perspective of the whole picture, but it often seems like everything is going down the tubes.

How long can we pray without losing heart? How can you continue to pray for outcomes that don't turn out and not start to wonder if cares, or worse, wonder if there is a God to hear our prayers.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about her granddaughter by marriage, Madeline. The two enjoy a close, trusting, and truthful relationship devoid of sentimentality. A small group of family gathered for Madeline's seventh birthday party. The candles on the cake were lit and they sang happy birthday. She was going to blow out the candles and her mother asked, "Aren't you going to make a wish? You have to make a wish, first.."

Madeline blurted out, "I don't know why I keep doing this." Taylor asked, "Doing what?" "This wish thing. Last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away, but she did. This year I want to wish that my mommy and daddy will get back together." Her mother said, "That's not going to happen. Don't waste your wish on that." Madeline said, "I know it's not going to happen, so why do I keep doing this?"

You don't need me to tell you that we aren't up to praying like Jesus, or following Paul's counsel to the first Christians to pray *without ceasing*. Jesus knew it would be a struggle for the disciples and for us. There aren't all that many widows around

to show us how to hound the “higher ups” to get what they have coming.

From the beginning to the end, the Bible sounds like a stuck record... “God loves us and cares for us... God loves us and cares for us.” At the conclusion of the parable Jesus asks if the Son of Man will find faith when he comes back. We are not very good at keeping up with anything forever. Whether it is staying on a diet for the twentieth time, or resolving to stick with a disciplined prayer life, we get weary and give up sometimes.... or many times.

The Lord isn't concerned with keeping track of our prayer records. What concerns him most is that we don't lose heart. If a poor widow with nothing to her name gets justice from a judge with nothing to his honor, how much more will God answer those he loves from the beginning? As often as we are told that God loves and cares, we are told to pray and pray and pray some more and more and more till our faces are blue, and after we catch our breath, to keep going and going and going... and not lose heart.

One of the more frustrating things that can happen while fishing is to get a “bird's nest” on a spinning reel. If you're not careful, a loop of line will pull off the spool which catches other loops, causing them to fly off the spool. The end result is a menagerie of knotted, twisted, and kinked line that tangles itself into a ball, or sometimes, two. The last thing you want to do is tighten one of the knots, but it's usually the first thing that happens.

The easiest way to remedy a bird's nest is to simply to cut it off and start over. But if the fishing isn't hot, I like the challenge trying to unravel the impossible mess of line. I put on magnifying glasses and begin to pick and pull. With hooks, hemostats and trial and error I work at it. Minutes go by with little progress, but with time I release one knot then another. New knots form as a result but I keep at it and eventually I find loose ends. The line starts to straighten until its finally free.

***[Note: The text of this portion of the sermon is only available on the video or audio sermoncasts.]***

**Barbara Taylor says that one day when Madeline asks her whether prayer really works, she will say, “Oh, sweetie, of course it does. It keeps our hearts chasing after God’s heart. It’s how we bother God, and its how God bothers us back. There’s nothing that works any better than that.”**