

Wrestling with Persistence: A Blessing
II Timothy 3:14-4:15 and Luke 18:1-8
Genesis 32:22-31
First Presbyterian Church
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One of the participants in the life of our congregation wrestles with chronic pain. She writes a blog, entitled “The Undefeated.” This is from one of her last posts:

“All of me hurts. I have shooting pain in my legs, hands, fingers, toes. Throughout my body I have terrible pain. I may have extreme pain for a few moments intermittently and then be dealing [for quite a while] with the aftermath of that pain. If it’s in my hips or knees or ankles or feet, walking becomes nearly impossible, and shuffling feels like a marathon. If the pain is in my shoulders or elbows or wrists or fingers, even opening a door or picking up a fork can cause me to cry.

“Sleep is no longer my safe haven. Pain has no qualms in waking me and rendering me helpless . . . at four in the morning, crying and praying for the pain to end.”

What do we do? How do we respond, when life seems to offer us mainly the opportunity to put our head down and slowly place one foot in front of the other, moment after moment?

Life is hard for us human beings. Life is hard for us followers of Jesus. The Apostle Paul talked a little about this in the fourth chapter of II Corinthians. Like our friend and sister the blogger, Paul admits that we are afflicted and perplexed and struck down, always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake. Afflicted, perplexed, struck down.

I love the image that Paul uses here, that we humans are only clay jars, earthen vessels, fragile vases, cracked pots.

But that is only part of the story. For God has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God – in the face of Jesus.

Think about that. In our hearts, the indelible beauty of light and love and life, God’s glory within us.

So this is how Paul puts it all together. “We do not lose heart. We have this amazing divine treasure in the simple clay jars of our bodies. We are afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; struck down, but not destroyed. We are being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, but always with the life of God present within us.”

This seems to be a season of deaths and memorial services here at our church. Bill Weiss’ service will be tomorrow at 11:00 am, Jim Harrison’s on Tuesday, the 25th, and Connie Maxian’s on Saturday, November 5.

I have learned a great deal about this rhythm of being afflicted, but never crushed; perplexed, but never despairing; struck down, but never destroyed from Connie Maxian. For years – years – Connie lived with the threat of the cancer with which she was suffering, every season, every month. Yet every time I saw her, she was smiling, upbeat, encouraging, asking about me and Anne.

A couple of days before she died, I visited her in the hospital. She and her daughter Kim had been in the emergency room almost all night, because one of her parotid glands had become infected. She was planning and hoping to spend her last few days of earthly life at home in hospice care, but because of the pain of this infection, she had to come back to the hospital. I saw her that morning, and she was hurting.

She was hurting, and they were not yet able to get her pain under control. I was a little desperate, because I wanted her to be at home, and I wanted her to be comfortable, and I wanted her to be at peace, and I was afraid none of that was happening.

I didn't know what to do, so I blurted out, "Connie, would you like me to sing to you?" Suddenly she grinned and said, "Yes!" and without waiting for me to ask what song she'd like to hear, she launched into "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong; they are weak but he is strong."

We sat there together and sang that song together.

And that's when I saw it. Connie was afflicted and perplexed and struck down, but she knew the peace of Christ and deep, God-given joy. I could see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in her face.

After we finished singing, she said, "I feel blessed. I feel blessed."

In our II Timothy lesson this morning, Paul points to the strong Christian witness of Timothy's grandmother and mother. Paul writes in the first chapter, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice." And this theme of persistence is echoed in today's verses. "Continue in what you have learned and believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings for salvation."

That is why I am here in large part, because of my mom and my dad. My mother's mother died in childbirth. She grew up with eleven other sisters and brothers on a farm; she never knew whether or not her family was poor, because she was always surrounded by the riches of her family's love. Even amid all the challenges she experienced, especially the difficult illnesses of my father over many years, she knew the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.

She was blessed.

She held onto the light within her by living out these words of scripture: Continue in what you have learned and believed. Be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. Endure suffering, and carry out your ministry fully.

Isn't it fascinating how strongly Jesus commends this attitude and orientation in this morning's parable from Luke? This widow, powerless and without any wealth or authority, keeps coming and coming and coming and coming and coming after the judge. She seeks justice. When she gets tired, she doesn't stop. When she gets sick, she doesn't stop. When she is misunderstood, she doesn't stop. When she realizes she is not the most popular or respected or appreciated, she doesn't stop.

This determined, persistent, impertinent, brassy widow is the one Jesus points to as our example. God will grant justice, he says, to those who cry out day and night.

God will give meaning and purpose to those who do not give up, who keep on keeping on, who labor and pray and yearn and hope and share the good news and work for justice at every turn.

Who will help the people of Haiti and eastern North Carolina if we do not?

Who will keep lifting up the needs of the hungry and homeless of Sarasota if we do not?

Who will make a difference in the lives of families and children and veterans
and the sick and the tired and the lonely if we do not?

Yes, sometimes we are sick. Yes, sometimes we are tired. Yes, sometimes we are irritated or upset with that deacon or elder or pastor or person sitting a few seats down from us. Sometimes, like civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer, we are sick and tired of being sick and tired.

But we cannot live out our faith fully if we do not continue and persist and endure, if we do not keep coming and coming and coming, crying to God day and night.

Many of us are at least a little familiar with this episode from the story of Jacob in Genesis. He wrestles with God at the River Jabbok, hour after hour, all through the night, until the sun is starting to rise. But perhaps not many of us note what takes place just before this episode.

Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, his inheritance blessing, many years before. And now as he approaches his first encounter with Esau, Jacob is nervous. He wonders if his brother's anger burns hot. So he sends a gift of amazing size and scope to his brother in advance of their meeting: dozens and hundreds of goats and sheep and camels and cattle and donkeys. He is trying to appease his brother.

By the time God appears to wrestle with Jacob, he has sent ahead everything he owns, everything he has, even his family. Jacob was left alone, utterly alone, and then this divine figure, God in the form of a man, wrestled with him all night long.

Jacob was left alone, worried, uncertain, without any sign or measure of wealth or wellbeing, and then he wrestles and wrestles and wrestles.

The sun begins to rise, and God says, "Let me go!" And Jacob replies, "I will not let you go, until you bless me."

Jacob called the place Peniel, face of God, for there he saw God face to face.

Perhaps the name of this place is Don't Stop. Perhaps the name of this place is Continue. Perhaps the name of this place is Pray Always and Do Not Lose Heart. Perhaps the name of this place is Keep Coming and Coming and Coming, Crying Out to God All Day and All Night.

We get tired. We get tired when the illness strikes or our friend turns away or our loved one dies. We get tired when we don't always agree and when we are sure the church is wrong.

God blesses us when we hold on. God blesses us when we Don't Stop.

Connie kept singing, even in the very last days. Even at the grave, our song is alleluia.

And what about our sister, our friend, the participant in our congregation who suffers with significant chronic discomfort? Near the close of her blog post, the same one in which she referenced the great depth of her pain, she writes this about the encouragement she experiences from her friends:

"One of them wrote me a letter about how I've made her want to go outside and love people because even at my lowest, that's what I've modeled to her. Another told me I would change lives wherever I go. She knew this, she said, because I had changed hers. She made sure to mention something her little sister had once said, that my hair looked like cotton candy and was cosmic goodness.

"So. Much. Encouragement.

"And," she continued, "they just kept thanking me for being in their lives. But it's me who is so crazy thankful. They have gifted my soul with their own soul fires, by which I warm myself when I am cold. I love their insight, intelligence, talent, love, hope, laughter, ferocity for life, openness to people, and their smiles. I love their smiles."

Even though pain and death, you and I are crazy thankful. Thankful. Thankful.

Thanks be to God.