

Persistence is a Virtue

What do you do with two grandsons when you realize you've arrived two hours early at the amusement park? Well, you have lunch nearby and try to drag it out. But thirty minutes later, there is more than hour to go and they want no more food. You explain to the boys that you'll just have to find a way to enjoy the time; but you don't believe your own words. Then, to your amazement, one grandson says: "That's ok; patience is a virtue." Not to be outdone, the other grandson says: "So is persistence."

I'm sure the boys remember a man they met a few years ago; a man who runs a tiny shop, in a small town, on an outer island of the Bahamas. His name is Vertrum Lowe, and for nearly thirty years he has built scale models of ships and sold them in the shop. Vertrum builds ship models of all sorts, from replicas of old sailing vessels to models of contemporary oil tankers. All faithfully represented. With lines accurately strung, and with many moveable parts. To make such models takes patience and persistence. Yet Vertrum Lowe sticks with it, year after year. Persistence is a virtue.

He's not the only one who has learned to persist. Over a thousand miles north, in Madison, Connecticut, Chris Greaves operates Yankee Steam, a small museum. There you will find antique vehicles and carriages, including a fully restored, English double-decker bus. The vehicles are diverse, some rare, but all

have been rebuilt carefully, with fresh paint and upholstery. It has taken years. But the results are amazing. Persistence is a virtue.

What does this wondrous persistence mean? It does not make Lowe or Greaves wealthy and only gradually has there been any public recognition. Rather they are driven by a devotion to craftsmanship, a love of vehicles and vessels. And a longing to share their sense of wonder. Building and rebuilding take time. The process never goes smoothly. It happens in fits and starts; it requires risk and innovation. But with persistence, creativity results. Persistence is a virtue.

Likewise, the persistence of a widow, described in today's Gospel, Luke 18. She is intent on securing justice; she will not relent. Finally, the judge, not given to fearing God or respecting anyone, gives in; then the persistent woman will leave him alone. Thus, Jesus says, "will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?"

We learn that being persistent is an act of faith; it is unswerving focus on a goal that apparently has been denied. Not just any goal, but a noble goal, namely justice. A prominent biblical category, the basis of hope for people who have been denied. The problem is, who today is the widow? And what justice is desired? It is not apparent today; there are many persistent people, many who feel that justice has been denied them. Claims of justice prompt legal actions of various sorts, such

as class action suits. Calls for justice, claims of having been wronged abound, often by all parties in a legal action. But whose justice should prevail?

Worse, in this unusual political season, persistent people and political groupings abound. In the high stakes game of political image building, various candidates claim to be able to right what is wrong, to advance justice. But this has become more than a game of political maneuvers. Countless people are outraged. Character assassination is rife. On all sides there are examples of persistence. But which fits the biblical example? Whose justice do we honor as Christians?

We must ask questions that have no obvious answer in Luke 18. Such as, what is the motivation at work? How is it that persistence today deepens our divisions? That answer is apparent: our divisions reveal alarming levels of fear and anger in our country. It has become more than a matter of genuine disagreement. A democratic political system requires different views, fuels debate, even prompting vigorous critiques of those who differ from our way of thinking.

But we have moved into rigid division, resistance to cooperation, reluctance to compromise, denunciation of difference, rigid forms of political correctness. We embody what the late historian Richard Hofstadter called “The Paranoid Style of American Politics.” Fear and anger prompt denunciations of those who disagree; innuendo overwhelms discussion of policy issues. We seem locked into this scene.

What do we do? Not do simply as citizens, as urgent as that is. What do we do as Christians? We declare in this worship that we are followers of Jesus Christ, and that somehow our faith sets us apart. The story of the persistent widow also implies that we must be different. But how? What does being different mean?

Once, years ago, deeply troubled by this question of what must distinguish us as Christians, I asked a favorite history professor this question: how should a Christian vote? He smiled and said: look at the good and righteous people, the people who claim values with certainty, the people ready to divide and to be divisive. Look at their views and then, as a Christian, do the opposite.

Gradually the meaning of this answer sank in. As Christians, we do not necessarily endorse any political party or position. Instead, as Christians, we have a different calling, a different motivation, a different persistence. It is not a matter of winning and losing, nor a matter of diminishing an opponent to elevate our favored position. Rather we persist much like a man in a shop in the Bahamas, or the owner of a small Connecticut museum. The core question we face is this: what is our purpose, for what do we stand; in a word, what do we intend to build?

It's easy to think that the persistent widow was an ancient example of our angry divisions today. We can tell she is incensed, though we don't know the details. She is in a combative mode. But Jesus speaks of faith, crediting the widow with a depth of belief we would do well to emulate. And the larger context of this

passage was Jesus' call for his followers to build on earth an anticipation of God's eternal kingdom. For us, this means pursuing a better way of life, a better way of being with one another. The kingdom must be defined by respect, reconciliation, and pursuit of the common good. What matters is what we are building, and how we are building it, together. Our persistence must reveal a commitment to serving God and honoring one another. Together and only together can we make effective responses to the challenges we face.

This is what the early Christian community discovered. They were divided in various ways, and never reached consensus on all issues. But thinking alike on all matters was not the greatest priority. The priority was to pull together, for the sake of the common good. We must value our connection to one another over any other loyalty; we must value opportunities to build a better world over the urge to justify one or another political position. In a sense Christianity is quite practical. Jesus Christ calls us to a new way of life, one that calls us out of our assumptions.

What then are you building? For what do you labor? Where do your energy and your time go? Will the lives of others become better because of your efforts? To answer these questions as a Christian, you must have persistence. Persistence to continue on the journey of growing and learning. The care and dedication of the craftsman are required. Only in this case you are not restoring old vehicles or

building scale models. You are building the life of faith and by your example others are learning to persist for what matters in life.

It will take time. It may not seem clever or flashy. It may not always make sense. There may be people, like the self-absorbed judge in Luke 18, who will not be impressed. But living into the Christian faith, and cultivating a sense of building life, not just going through it, is the most worthwhile goal of all. It is the path toward purpose and hope, joy and peace, that no other avenue can provide.

Our persistence can bring us together, connecting us in life-giving ways, here locally and as a nation. Persistence is a virtue. May God bless us and sustain us in our pursuit of the life worth living.

William L. Sachs

October 16, 2016

Persistence is a Virtue

- I. Two grandsons and a closed amusement park. Persistence is a virtue
- II. A Bahamas craftsman
- III. The biblical widow
- IV. What sort of justice? “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”
- V. Not what we are tearing down, but what we are building. The Kingdom of God