

Never Give Up
July 25, 2010
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Rev. Susan B. Rice
Text: Luke 11:1-13

I grew up in small southern town, much like Mayberry in Andy Griffith—if you can believe that. It really was—everyone knew everyone—and what they did (for better or worse). All the parents knew all the kids and to whom they belonged and would correct you or call your parents in a heartbeat, should the need so arise (for better or worse). You could ride your bike all day long, all over town; stay out until dark with no cell phones and no worries. I would walk to my piano lessons, cut through the woods and was never afraid. You could ride your pony down main street (unless it was vacation season because all the beach traffic came right through the middle of Ellerbe—great for the farmers, not so great for riding horses down main street). For the most part it was a safe place and everyone knew everyone. All that to tell you this one thing. I was out roller skating one day, alone. I had decided I would roller skate to Joe’s Gas Station to get one of those little cokes (or co-colas my grandmother called them) in the little bottles. They always taste better in the little bottles, don’t you think? Anyway—it wasn’t a long skate up to Joe’s, but it was a bit uphill and I was probably nine or ten at the most. It was a hot day, much like our days here have been. About half way there, I began to think I couldn’t make it, so I sat down on the grass on the side of the little neighborhood road, and began to fiddle with my skates, trying to figure out if it would be easier to walk than to skate. About that time, this older man came walking toward me—in overalls and a dirty white shirt. While I wasn’t afraid, I didn’t know him—had never seen him—wasn’t sure where he came from. He stopped right in front of me, “Ya taking a break?” he asked me. “Yes-sir, I guess.” I said. He smiled and began to shake his index finger at me—not in a mean way, but in a humorous sort of playful way, “It’s okay to

stop and rest, young lady” he said with a slight grin, “but never, never, never give up.” And then he was on his way to wherever he was going. Perhaps he was quoting Winston Churchill, or perhaps he just came out with it, who knows. I didn’t think much about it then, but for some reason that has stuck with me through all these years—it has stuck with me almost to a fault. It has become one of those core values you learn about in psychology classes—“It’s okay to stop and rest, but never, never, never give up!” It especially comes to me during difficult times of my life or when I am trying to do something physical that I am probably too old to do.

It came back to me again as I read our lesson for today. Our scripture lesson this morning begins with Jesus teaching the disciples how to pray. This is the Lukan version of the Lord’s prayer: shorter, more concise, but still with the same essential structure and theology as the long version we have adopted as the Lord’s Prayer and use in worship and in other places. The prayer lesson, if you will, is quickly followed by a parable—a bit disconnected one at that and one that raises some troubling theological questions. What sort of God is this who demands that we, like the persistent man at midnight, keep badgering God before God will respond? While we will touch a bit on that this morning—I want to focus more on the theme of persistence; persistence in prayer, persistence in worship, persistence in our relationship with God. The hidden line that runs throughout this passage, more implied than straight forward—is that our persistence in our relationship with God will pay off. There is the implied promise that God is quite willing to respond to our prayers. Let’s keep that in mind, but let’s focus today on never giving up—on persistence.

We know that we are saved by grace; that is we are saved not by anything we do, but by what God does. There is nothing we can do that has not already been done by Jesus Christ. We are saved by grace! That being said, there is still a call for persistence--thus, the parable about a

very persistent intruder at midnight. Jesus calls him “friend.” But anyone, friend or not, that bangs on your door in the middle of the night seems more like an intruder. Regardless the man banging on the door appears to be in quite a fix—it seems a friend has arrived at his house in the middle of the night—probably hungry after a long trip and he has nothing to give him. Now to us, it seems quite unlikely that a friend would arrive in the middle of the night expecting to be fed. However, in the context of this passage, it was not all that unusual as people often traveled late to avoid the heat of the day and would often stay with friends as the inns were often unsafe. Hospitality was extremely important, so to have someone arrive and not offer them food and drink was a no no. So we have this man who has a friend show up in the middle of the night—he has nothing to give him to eat, so he goes to the nearest neighbor and bangs on the door asking for food. The response: “Go away, I’ve already locked the door and my entire family is in bed.” Remember their houses were not like ours, more than likely they were all sleeping in one large room or at least in close proximity of one another—so if he gets up—he will wake everyone and no one EVER wants to wake a sleeping child or baby—right? So he tells the man to go away. But it seems, according to Jesus, that the man keeps on banging on the door—he is persistent. He does not give up or go away—so eventually the man gets up and deals with the situation if for no other reason than so he can get back to sleep. He doesn’t really care about the man’s predicament; he only wants him to go away. Now this brings to mind the question I raised earlier in this sermon—are we to take from this that God is like that sulky friend at midnight, the man who requires constant banging on the door in order to even get attention? So let’s get that out of the way. I agree with William Willimon who insists that prayer is more than the words that we say to God. Prayer is all of the things that we do and say in our relationship with God. In fact, our relationship with God is prayer. So this is not so much about the right way to pray, but

more about our right relationship with God. God, in Jesus Christ, has already done all that needs to be done to fulfill God's part in the relationship. God sent his only son, Jesus Christ to live among us, teach us, heal us, suffer for us, die and rise again for us. He came back to us and forgave us—that was God's part of the deal.

But what about us—what about our part of the deal? I like to think this is a parable about that. Our part of the deal is persistence. Yes, I did say we are saved by grace and we are—we are saved by grace and not by our works, but , we must persistently cultivate our relationship with God.

I often have people come to me and say they don't feel close to God, that somehow God doesn't seem to be "with" them. They say that when they pray, they feel like they're just talking to the air or themselves. And more times than not they will tell me a story about the way they have seen God working in someone else's life, but they don't see God working in their life. God has said or done nothing to them, they say. I always wonder when these statements are made who has done the moving. I don't believe that God has moved away from them or become distant from them, but rather the other way around – they have become distant from God. We've all been there a time or two in our own lives—when we feel as if we are just going through the motions. But I wonder sometimes if people even stop going through the motions, because most of the time going through the motions will eventually bring about a reawakening of our relationship with God. I wonder how often do they participate in worship. Do they ever pray? Do they ever read the Bible or seek God's word for their lives?

I read this modern day parable somewhere and I must apologize as I cannot remember the source but it went something like this: A man and a woman were married. They said their vows and promised, as you do when you are married, to live together forever. They went on

their honeymoon, but shortly after their honeymoon the man went on a trip. He doesn't call, he doesn't leave a forwarding address, and he doesn't email—nothing. She hears nothing from him at all. He does eventually show back up, however—ten years later. He went to his wife and thought he would just pick up where he left off—resume his married life. To his surprise, his wife hardly recognized him. She had had their marriage annulled, and was now married to another man. He couldn't understand it—“Why don't you love me anymore?” he protested. “Why have you left me and married someone else? Why have you broken our marriage vows?”

I have observed over the years that people often seek God in times of distress—the loss of a loved one, a tragedy in the home, loss of a job, the failure of a relationship. While I certainly empathize with them and do my best to help them find their way through, I do always wonder if one's relationship is right with God to begin with perhaps the event would not have been quite as devastating—perhaps they would have had something to draw on had they been tending to their well, so to speak. It's hard to draw water from a well that is dry. That's not to say that if your relationship is right with God that bad things won't happen—it's just to say that when they do happen—you already have a place to rest.

Therefore, we must be persistent. You will notice that in church, despite the variation in our Sunday services, our Sundays here are characterized by ritual, habit, repetition. Now that's not just because we're Presbyterian and we like things done decently and in order—or because we as Presbyterians are inherently traditionalists, but rather because we are persistent. Jesus has called us to keep at it. We are formed in this world by so many different habits and rituals, why should our spiritual life and faith life not also be secured by habits and rituals? If you say the Apostles' Creed over and over enough and it becomes part of you—it also begins to define who

you are. As you come to church Sunday after Sunday after Sunday—that too becomes a habit—a defining of who you are and what you are about.

We live in a world of instant gratification. Baking a potato that used to take an hour, takes six minutes in the microwave. Waiting for someone to write you back is nonexistent anymore thanks to email, twitter, IM, and all the other technology that we have. Unfortunately it has brought us to expect the fruits of the Christian life, like joy, peace, trust, courage, confidence and all the rest to be instantaneous as well. It should just happen, it should just come to us—without the disciplines of the Christian life—you know regular worship, studying scripture, time in prayer and meditation, gathering around the communion table. Many of us think that if we go on a Christian retreat—we can “get” the Christian faith in a weekend. But beware of a promise of an easy, quick payoff when it comes to your relationship with God. I liken it to a friendship in a way—only much more than that. You know how long it takes to develop true friendships—those friendships that carry you through the difficult days—that are reciprocal. Those friendships that are easy, relaxing, let your hair down friendships. It takes a long time to develop a true friendship—often times there must be hours, years of being with one another, hanging out together, conversing with one another, hearing stories about each other’s lives. You can’t possibly have a really good friend overnight. It requires time. The same is true in regard to our relationship with God. God is totally available to use and wants much more for us than a good friend even—for Jesus says “how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?” Are we totally available to God? We get distracted by the things of this world, by our busy schedules, by the numerous responsibilities we shoulder and then we are not available even in the slightest. We must keep focusing, listening, tuning our souls to God—we must keep at it Sunday after Sunday, Bible Study after bible Study—prayer after prayer—not

because we must badger God for God knows our every need and our every thought, but we must badger ourselves. We must be persistent—so never, never, never give up! In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.