

PERSISTENT FAITH: THE EXAMPLE OF SOJOURNER TRUTH

Luke 18:1-8

Kelly B. Brill
Avon Lake UCC
9 November 2014

I am not much of an activist. I raised a son who is a political activist, and I admire those who advocate passionately for justice, but it doesn't come naturally to me.

I have recently become more of one, however. The UCC churches in Ohio make up the Ohio Conference, and I serve on their Board of Directors. This congregation's most direct link to the Ohio Conference is through their outdoor ministries and camping programs. We are one of the churches which send the most people to camp every year throughout the state. Some years we have been the church which sent the very most. Our camping programs are in financial trouble, and I have become an advocate for them. I have spoken loudly and often at the board meetings, I have called our Conference Minister on the phone, I have gathered groups of other ministers together. I believe so strongly that these ministries are vital and should continue that I am now looked at by some as an activist. (Or a pain in the rear!)

It's an interesting new role for me to play. What I notice about myself, if I'm honest - and I'm not particularly proud to admit this - is that I am an impatient activist. I don't mind calling together a meeting, moderating a discussion, and following up with an email. I don't mind speaking up at a board meeting. But when nothing happens, I am tempted to give up. ("I tried, oh well!") I struggle, wondering if this activism is really worth my time and energy. I think about the other commitments in my life, efforts that may be more worthwhile.

If you look at the lives of those people who have made change happen, you see that one of the qualities these individuals embody is persistence. Gandhi is credited with leading India to independence and inspiring movements for civil rights and freedom around the world. He didn't attend a couple of meetings, write a few letters, or give a half dozen speeches. His activism began when he was an attorney in South Africa, it gained speed when he returned to India, and it continued for over fifty years until his death by assassination. He spent over 50 years organizing the poor, leading campaigns to ease poverty and build unity; his actions resulted in years spent in jail. He persisted. He did not give up.

Martin Luther King's life was cut short at an earlier age than Gandhi's, but his, too, was a life of persistence despite great obvious personal risk. Persistence, you see, isn't just a matter of time; it isn't just enduring. Persistence is enduring despite the toll it takes on one's life.

One of our church book clubs read a book called Far From the Tree, a book which chronicles the stories of parents whose children are born with deafness, autism, Downs syndrome, dwarfism and other identities that present challenges. Advocating on behalf of their children has become a passion for many of these parents; they have found their lives transformed from rather ordinary to extraordinary. Whether it's battles with the school system, with doctors, or with society as a whole, these parents have become lifelong activists for their children. I truly admire their persistence.

We may not all be called to live our lives as activists, but I wonder if some activism isn't a part of the life of discipleship. I wonder if one can truly be a leader without some measure of activism. Surely leadership requires persistence. Leaders

who give up easily are not leaders for long. Change takes time, and work, and patience.

Our scripture passage for today makes a point about persistence. There are some parables we love to tell and re-tell, stories like the parable of the prodigal son or the good samaritan, the parable about the man who searches for the lost sheep. Those parables make us feel good about God as a loving parent, and about how we are to live as disciples of Jesus.

Today's parable isn't one we talk about much. If you're like me, it leaves you feeling a bit uncomfortable.

Remember that there's not a hero in every parable. Some parables are told to help us form a picture of God. In the Prodigal Son story, God is the parent who loves unconditionally, who waits for a wayward child to come home. But God doesn't appear in every parable. Jesus tells us, right up front, what this parable is about. There's no guessing. "This is a parable about how to pray and not lose heart." In other words, a story about persistence. Imagine a judge, who is known for nothing except toughness. Not fairness, not sentimentality, just toughness. Now imagine a widow, who is desperate, at the end of her rope, because in biblical times, if you were a widow, you were literally at the mercy of others. You couldn't own property, you had limited ways to support yourself. Someone owes this woman something and she needs it, badly. The judge refuses the woman. But she does not give up. She knocks on his door, every morning, "It's me. Please grant me what is owed me." He shuts the door and tries to ignore her. She does it every morning, sometimes multiple times during the day. She is the robo call you hang up on. She is the spam email you delete over and over again.

She is the junk mail that fills your mail box during election season. She will not give up. She stands at the door and knocks, until her knuckles are bleeding from the persistent knocking. Finally, the judge has had enough. He wants to get rid of her, and for that reason alone, she is given the justice she has sought for so long.

If there would be a hero in the story, it would be her. But it's not so much her, as it is the characteristic she embodies that we are to notice. It is her persistence. This parable encourages a kind of holy boldness, an unwillingness to give up on what we believe is right. You cannot be a disciple without it. You cannot maintain faith for a lifetime without it. You can't be a leader if you don't persist. The preacher Fred Craddock famously says of this passage, "We don't know what prayer is until we stand at a door with bloody knuckles."

Persistence is patience that comes at a price.

Sojourner Truth was nine years old and known as Belle when she was sold into slavery, along with a flock of sheep, for \$100. Her owner promised to free her a few months before the state of New York began to emancipate slaves, but when he did not keep his promise, she ran away, along with her infant daughter. Her other daughter and son stayed behind. When she learned that her five year old son, Peter, had been illegally sold to a man in Alabama, she took the issue to court and eventually secured Peter's return from the south. It was one of the first cases in which a black woman successfully challenged a white man in a United States court.

As a free woman, she changed her name, embraced the Christian faith, and began to work for the abolition of slavery. She became known as an inspirational speaker, one of a few escaped slaves to rise to prominence as an abolitionist leader

and a testament to the humanity of enslaved people. Her most famous speech, now called “Ain’t I A Woman?” was delivered not far from here, in Akron, at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851. Many abolitionists at the time considered her too radical because she was advocating for women and not just for men, but she believed that freedom was only 50% accomplished if the rights of women were being ignored. She sought political equality and civil rights for all people. She met on at least one occasion with President Lincoln, talking with him about her beliefs and her experiences.

You could say that her first bold act of persistent activism occurred in 1826 when she escaped from slavery. It didn’t end until her death in 1883. That’s at least 57 years of persistence on behalf of justice. Although she began her career as an abolitionist, she cared about and spoke about prison reform, property rights and the right to vote.

We can imagine that life as an outspoken black woman in the late nineteenth century was not easy. This story gives us a glimpse into what kinds of obstacles she faced.

She was preaching at a tent revival in Massachusetts when a rowdy mob of young men entered the tent with clubs and sticks, with the clear intent of breaking up the group and causing fear. She too was afraid and hid. But she later said this, “I then remembered who I was, not Belle Hardenbergh the former slave, not Belle Hardenbergh an illiterate and powerless black woman, but Sojourner Truth - called to preach, called to testify, called to greatness. I said to myself, ‘Shall I run away and hide from the devil? Me, a servant of the living God? Have I not faith enough to go out and quell that mob? I’ll go to the rescue and the Lord shall go with me and protect me.’” A bystander wrote, “She walked out, found a small mound of earth to use as a pulpit, and began

singing a song of Christ's resurrection." She continued to sing as the mob of young men surrounded her with clubs and sticks. But instead of beating her, they became transformed and asked her to continue singing and tell them her story. She said to the young men, "I will sing one more spiritual and then you will leave and allow our revival meeting to continue in peace."

She demonstrated the power of persistent faith. The struggles of those on the front line fighting for justice make my arguments on behalf of camp seem minor. But whether the struggles are global or personal, leadership requires that we learn persistence, never giving up until our conscience is satisfied, standing at the door knocking until our hands are raw and bleeding. What struggles for justice are tugging at your heart and mind? In what ways are you called to be persistent?