

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
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“We Will Persevere”

Several years after my family arrived in Canada, the movie *The Ten Commandments*, dubbed in Italian, arrived at a theatre near us. I can't remember how it happened, but my parents went to see it. It was the first time that they went to a theatre and from my recollection, it was also their last. It wasn't that they didn't enjoy the experience, as they didn't stop talking about for days. But they knew very little English and as you can imagine there aren't very many movies dubbed in Italian that show up at theatres.

They told us all about the movie and especially how God handed down His Ten Commandments to Moses for His people to follow. That was the first time I had ever the mention of any commandments from God. I had never seen a Bible and the only time I heard it read was at church. I thought the bible was only for priests. The Roman Catholic church does not have Bible in the pews and we never had one in the house. I never considered going to the library, as for me, that was only for the rich not for a poor Italian immigrant.

Eventually I did learn all Ten Commandments and they became the guide by which I lived. So much so, that every year, I passed them on to the youth of this church. They were even stenciled on the walls of the youth group room. To me, the Ten Commandments are far more than a 'do and do not list' they teach us about God's perfect character. The laws are windows into God's holiness. To fulfill the law means to be closer to God himself. Every one of the Ten Commandments reflects some aspect of the God's character. Why should you not commit adultery; because God is faithful. Why should you not lie; because God is truth.

Even Jesus emphasized their importance. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Jesus' ministry did not preach that the Ten Commandments were null and void. He came to teach that they were as active as ever! More than this, Jesus preaches that the commandments require more of us than I originally thought.

More than avoiding a specific behavior, like murder, Jesus tells us that perfect obedience to the law also requires that we do not think of evil thoughts against one's brother. It's not enough that we do not commit adultery, but we should not look at anyone with lust. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, also turn to them the other cheek. We are not only to love our neighbor, but we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

For the Christian, the law doesn't push us from God, it brings us closer to Him. And as Christians we have made a commitment to God to live Christ like. Not that we have to be perfect like Christ but that we persevere to do our best. Those who do not try and try again are bound to fail. Those who persist, who labour unceasingly, who hang in, generally accomplish a great deal.

On September 17 1911 Galbraith Perry Rogers, the first pilot to fly across the United States from coast to coast left Long Island, New York and on November 5th he arrived in Pasadena, California. Of those 48 days, the time Captain Perry spent in the air was only 3 days, 10 hours and 14 minutes. Along the way he crashed 39 times and made 30 other unscheduled stops. The only parts of the original plane that were left, at the completion of the trip, were the rudder, and the drip pan.

Perseverance is a theme in all three readings from the scriptures today; perseverance in the face of suffering and injustice, perseverance in the face of neglect and rejection, and perseverance in the face of trials and adversities.

The Bible has many examples of perseverance. Paul, who despite being imprisoned, stoned, flogged, beaten, and shipwrecked and having to endure hunger, thirst, nakedness, and rejection, went to all the known world and preached the gospel and so brought to completion the job to which Christ called him. In the Old Testament reading this morning, Jacob wrestled with the angel at the River Jabuk and refused to let this much stronger opponent go until he receives a blessing,

In the Gospel reading, Luke sets the story in the context of a challenge Jesus makes to his disciples to pray always and not lose heart. His story describes a widow who wouldn't give up until she got what she wanted from an uncaring - an unjust - judge. Jesus concludes the story by saying: "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" Jesus seems to be making a link between perseverance and blessing; between unflagging doggedness and achieving one's goal.

The lesson seems clear, persevere and you will be blessed. If we work at praying hard enough, if we just hang in there and ask God long enough then God will roll over and give us what we want.

However, this kind of assertion reduces the gospel to a mere matter of works and it lays guilt trips on some people and creates pride in others: If you try hard enough, God will give you stuff, and, if you don't try hard enough, God will not listen to you, and you won't get what you want or need.

But this is not the perseverance talked about in our scripture readings; rather it's the perseverance of faith, the perseverance which arises out of the hope that we have in God, a hope that plays out in how we live in the world, a hope that believes in a God of grace, a God who freely gives his people what they need.

Jesus tells His disciples, and us, this story so we can draw a contrast between God and the uncaring Judge. If a corrupt and unjust Judge will render justice because the plaintiff is so persistent, how much more is God, who loves us and is concerned about us, is always willing to answer us when we call to him?

Jesus calls us, with the example of the widow and the unjust judge, to have faith, to trust that God, in his goodness, will bring about the justice we all seek, the blessing we all require. No matter what happens we should continue in prayer for these things for God will answer us.

Bad things will happen and sometimes it seems to us that God doesn't care, that he doesn't make a difference in our lives, that justice won't come about, that evil will prevail, that death will have the last word. It's at these times that Jesus says we ought to pray always and not lose heart.

Many forces attack us and often it seems that all there is bad news and we find ourselves losing heart. Indeed, many of us fall into doubt and unbelief when faced with suffering and injustice.

Even Timothy, the Apostle Paul's young friend, went through a period of discouragement. He attempted to preach the gospel and was threatened by the authorities; he tried to spread the word - but was ignored by the crowds; he spoke of healing and of salvation,

Paul's message to him was simple: "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed... proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching."

We are in a spiritual battle and we need to use the spiritual tools provided by God if we are to be victorious, if we are to keep the faith and not loose heart. One of those tools most surely is prayer, persistent prayer, persevering prayer.

Persistence in prayer is part of what faithfulness is all about. It means refusing to give in to appearances and continuing to trust God to act in his way and in his time. It may appear that we are alone. It may appear that God does not hear. It may appear that injustice and evil are prevailing. But faith dares us to go on praying, it dares us to approach the reality we cannot see and live by it.

This is what makes people of faith different from other people. We are willing to live by what we cannot see, but believe to be real, rather than by what we can see, and what the world tells us is real. Jesus calls us to pray always and not to lose heart. God has a blessing in mind for us. He has promised to stand by us and to vindicate us. He has promised a new heaven and a new earth. He has promised to save and deliver those of us who trust in him, those who are joined to his people, those who have faith.

We at New St. James have been facing many challenges: the search for a new minister to lead us in word and sacrament is still going on after two years, the interim minister will be gone by the end of the month, we continually face a deficit budget and the list goes on. We need to keep courage and faith that God is looking after us. Let's keep the search committee in our prayers to give them the faith and strength to continue to serve us and find the right minister. Let's encourage our board of managers, who have the financial responsibility of the building that we are behind them in all their financial decisions. Most importantly, let's encourage each other that we will face the challenges in front of us with hope, faith, and the confidence that God will always be at our side. God has provided us with what we need to persevere; he has provided us with all the tools we require to live life triumphantly and well. With continuous prayer and commitment to God, we will persevere to fulfill God's plan for us.

I would like to end with a story of true perseverance:

Amberley Snyder was born in January of 1991 in southern California. At the age of three, Amberley began riding lessons and developed an unyielding passion for horses. At the age of seven she got her first barrel racing horse. Before long she was competing in local rodeos. In 2009, she qualified for the National High School Finals and later won the All-Around Cowgirl World Championship. Amberley had her sights on college, competing in college rodeo, and was excited preparing for the upcoming changes in her life. She was completely unaware of the magnitude of the change to come.

On January 10th, 2010 Amberley was on her way to the Denver Stock Show and Rodeo when she lost control of her truck. It slid off the road and rolled and she was ejected from the vehicle. She was slammed into a fence post that broke her back and immediately she lost feeling in her legs.

After five hours of emergency surgery the doctor's prognosis was that she would never regain use or feeling below her waist. The one mistake she made that day changed her life forever, but it has not defeated her competitive spirit. The top priority for Amberley was not even to walk, but to ride her horses again. She told her therapist that her goal was walk, ride rodeo. Remarkably after only 4 months after the accident, she was back on her horse.

Through all the challenges and adversity Amberley has had to face, it hasn't stopped her from achieving any of her goals. In May of 2015 Amberley graduated college. She's competed with the best in the rodeo industry and has won The American a rodeo comparable to the Super Bowl. Amberley now is inspiring thousands across America by telling her inspirational story and competing in rodeos across the western United States. She ends her presentations by saying: "my goal after the accident was walk, ride, rodeo. I got the ride and rodeo, the walk, well, maybe someday!"

Let's give thanks for her perseverance and pray that she does indeed walk. Amen