

Proper 24 C

Persistence

October 16, 2016

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Have you ever found yourself in a long, on-going fight with someone? Maybe a property dispute or a family argument or something else where you and one other party were in a battle over who was right and no one wanted to give up. These can be long, disheartening, frustrating experiences and the result isn't always as satisfying as we'd like. But they don't have to be. Sometimes these kinds of on-going fights can lead to something life-giving.

At least, that is what I experienced after the many years I was in an on-going argument with God, and I'm not sure I started it.

This fight started about the time I was 7 years old and had the opportunity to get to know several nuns who were in the Episcopal order of the Sisterhood of the Holy Nativity in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. My mother is an associate to that order, and they held quiet days and other events at their convent for associates and provided child care for the associates' children. That meant I got to spend a day here and there with nuns, and in those nuns I saw something I felt attracted to, you might even say called to. It was a sort of joy, a joy in giving your life to serve God. I felt that was something I wanted to be part of and so I decided I was going to be a nun when I grew up. But when I turned 10 or 12 I started to see things differently. I saw that a man could give his life to serve God and the church as a priest and still have possibilities like getting married and having a family that were not possible for women who gave their lives to serving God and the church as nuns. Remember, I come from a diocese that didn't allow women's ordination until about 15 years ago, so while my observation could be seen as a form of feminism, to me it was the beginning of recognizing what God was calling me to. There is a difference between the roles, service and vows of priests and nuns or monks. For example, priests do not take the same vows of celibacy and poverty that nuns and monks do, and I was seeing I wasn't called to the life of a nun. So while I couldn't yet quite articulate it, the seed of the call had been planted in me.

Those same nuns helped that seed grow and they helped me see the call more clearly when they challenged me to give my life to God, to discern what God wants me to do with my life and to help me figure that out, they taught me a prayer to pray daily. Perhaps you are familiar with this prayer: God, give me the

wisdom to know what you would have me do and give me the courage and strength to do it. I know it is not a very eloquent prayer. It is pretty straight forward. And it is a prayer that God takes seriously. It is a prayer God answers, but God's answer hasn't always been what I have wanted to hear, such as when God answered that prayer by calling me to be a priest. This call contradicted my family's values. This call was not strongly supported by the diocese I grew up in. This call did not fit with the kind of lives most of my friends or family members wanted for themselves or me. So, I responded by telling God no.

Not just once, but every time a friend or clergy person told me they thought I should be a priest. Or every time I felt that tug during the Sunday liturgy, or during private prayer or reflection. For years I kept saying no to God and God responded by continuing to call me, and as time went on God became more persistent. If you haven't been embroiled in a fight with God, you might find what I am saying difficult to understand or relate to. So here is an example that might help:

At one time I was serving on the Standing Committee, which is a high level diocesan committee, and in the Diocese of Fond du Lac, one of the things it was responsible for was creating the process for ordination. We had to interview those who felt called to be deacons and priests and I quickly learned the stump questions, the ones that weeded out those the institution felt were not ready or really called. One that we used often was: "Why do you need to be ordained in order to do what God is calling you to do?" It is actually a much easier to answer question than it sounds. But I felt it was a powerful question because I saw how it was used to keep people out of the ordination process, or at least until they were ready.

At the same time I was also the director of Christian formation in my parish and I had worked hard to turn around a dying and dysfunctional Sunday school program. Thanks to a lot of prayer, work, parish support and the Holy Spirit, Sunday school had become a lively, Spirit filled program that was actually attracting families to the parish. One Sunday, after a particularly beautiful Sunday school experience, one where I wasn't teaching, just watching from the outside, I decided to get feisty with God again and justify saying no to God's calling. I started by thanking God for the wonderful Sunday school experience, I pointed out how I could almost see the Holy Spirit as its Presence was quite palpable that day. I said I felt humbled and heartened to see the children feel the Love of God

so powerfully. Then I threw in my zinger, with great pride in my own cleverness and intelligence and in a brilliant display of hubris I said to God, “See, I don’t have to be ordained to do what you are calling me to do.” As I recall I even smirked as I used what I had learned in Standing Committee to make my point to God.

And God responded just as swiftly as Jesus promised in our Gospel today by saying - yes I “heard” God respond with words, words I heard not so much in my ear but in my heart and soul – and the words were: “Deborah, they all need to feel my love.”

And I was just as quick to respond; I said back, I hate you.

It’s quite alright to talk to God like that. God knew what I meant. I hated that God wasn’t impressed by my cleverness. And I was frustrated because it was quite clear that God wasn’t going to give up. No matter what I threw at God, no matter what I did or said, God was in this fight for as long as it would take. No matter how clever or stubborn I could be, in that moment I realized God is a whole lot more stubborn than even I am.

That is the moment I started to give in. And a new journey began for me, one where I stopped fighting God and started learning to follow God by accepting God’s will. But that doesn’t mean the fight was a waste of time, effort, or energy. Because that fight taught me a lot about God. I learned God isn’t far away or easily angered, injured or insulted by whatever I say, and I believe that means God is not injured by what anyone else says either. God respects the gift of choice God has given to us, which means we can say no to God, but that doesn’t mean God gives up on us. God doesn’t give up. I learned God’s love for us is fierce, and God is persistent.

When I look at stories in the Bible, stories like those of Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Jeremiah, David, Isaiah, Elisha and Elijah, they all show how God was with them and didn’t give up on them even when they grew weary, frustrated, frightened or disheartened with doing the work God had given them to do. And because God didn’t give up on them, they didn’t lose heart and give up doing what God had called them to do.

So when I read the parable in today’s Gospel, along with the reading from Jeremiah where the prophet shares God’s deep desire that one day we all will know God in our hearts, and the reading from the letter to Timothy where Timothy is encouraged to not give up I couldn’t help but remember the ways God keeps persisting in calling people like you and me to follow God, not as a power

play, not to lord it over us, but as a way for us to get to know God so that we can help others know God and God's Love. Most often we hear this parable of the persistent widow interpreted that the unjust judge is God and we are the widow and we need to pester God until God gives us what we want. But I am not sure that interpretation is consistent with God as Jesus showed us. Jesus made a point of repeating the judge is not someone who knows or respects God or people and only gives in to the widow because he grew weary of her. He didn't really change.

Remember parables are stories meant to get us thinking, they are not intended to be allegories. If we go to this parable looking for God, the behavior of persistent widow is much more like God than the judge. Perhaps it is challenging for us to see the widow, a person who is vulnerable and seen as someone without power in this parable as being like God; perhaps we are more likely to relate to God in the role of authority and power. But one of the things Jesus shows us in his life, death and resurrection is that God's power is not like the power we give to each other. God's power isn't in status, wealth, or position. God's power is love that is stronger than death. Jesus also showed us God isn't only on the side of the wealthy and influential, God loves and seeks out the vulnerable, forgotten, outcast people too. God loves them fiercely.

Perhaps one of the messages of this parable isn't about nagging God so much as it learning to value being persistent, praying with God who is not deaf to our prayers, but is actually longing to engage with them. When we pray a prayer like the ones the nuns taught me, a prayer to open our hearts, minds, and souls to God's will for our lives and the courage and strength to live into that we open ourselves to the possibility of getting to know God in a way that is powerful, personal, and communal all at the same time. Perhaps the point of persistence isn't getting what we want, but the opportunity to get to know God better and discover just how much God does love us and what God is calling us to, both personally and as a parish.

A month or so ago another study of survey results was released that showed church attendance is declining and there is nothing to indicate it is going to turn around any time soon. In response to this study, many laypersons, clergy, and consultants started blaming institutions, culture, and themselves. Perhaps that is what is most disheartening to me, is to see the church I feel called to serve beating itself up over the decline. Now, I'm not saying there is anything wrong with accountability, because there isn't and certainly we need to know what we have done wrong, admit to it, repent, and turn back to God. The point I want to

make is this news can be discouraging. It can be easy to blame, to beat ourselves up, to lose heart, which is why I believe today's readings are so important, because they can remind us of the important of persistence, not persisting in doing something that no longer works, but persisting in prayer. To pray as both individuals and a parish to God for God to give us the wisdom to do know what God wants us to do and to pray for the courage and strength to do it. The reported decline doesn't mean the presence and work of any parish is no longer relevant or important. It is. Our parish is a place where God is Present, and despite whatever challenges or changes or fears or worries we might experience because of choices we've made, or choices someone else makes, God isn't going to give up on us. Together with God we can persist in figuring out how our ministry can look in this day and age, so that God's love can be known, shared, and help bring healing, life-giving hope to the world. We've just got to keep at it, and if it sounds hard, perhaps it will help knowing we aren't alone, God is with us, loves us, and believes in us.