Sunday, October 18, 1998
PERSISTENCE CAN BE A VIRTUE
Luke 18:1-8

As you look at your life, are there some things you started that you now wish you hadn't quit? Knowing when to stop what you're doing and start in a new direction, and when to persist and keep going, can be a difficult decision.

Although this is a sermon on the virtue of persistence, I need to begin with a disclaimer — persistence is not always a virtue in and of itself. Sometimes this is painfully obvious — to persist in practicing a bad habit that harms yourself and others is foolish, but that doesn't stop us from doing it. Smoking is one example.

Or to persist in holding on to an idea that has been proven false is not a virtue. Someone once said, "It is not possible to dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper. If a hole is in the wrong place, no amount of improvement will put it in the right place." No matter how obvious this may seem to every digger, it is still easier to go on digging in the same hole than to start all over again in a new place.

The kind of persistence needed here is to see the larger picture and to keep searching without being afraid to dig in another place.

Persistence is always a virtue when you are doing something worthwhile, working for a just cause, or trying to learn a new skill that not only helps you and others but also brings joy to your life because you persisted until you reached the goal. Persistence is also a necessary virtue in the practice of prayer and in strengthening your spiritual life.

That's the point of the story Jesus told in today's scripture reading. A widow was seeking justice from a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. At first, the judge paid little attention to her case, but she persisted day after day. She refused to give up because she knew her cause was just. Finally, the judge gave in. According to the story, he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually bothering me."

This widow was not content to wait for God to grant her justice at some unspecified time in the future. She pursued the matter and kept at it until justice was granted.

This kind of persistence is a virtue. Jesus is telling us through this little story that it is not enough to be passive and simply wait for inspiration or answers from God. We need to take an active part. The widow in the story would not have received justice by sitting around and waiting.

This past week I have been reading a new book titled Inspired: The Breath of God. It's a book of conversations the authors had with gifted people about their faith and inspiration.

Without exception, the contributors to this book are hardworking and passionate. When they associate their creativity with God, they do not claim that God creates for them — sometimes through them — but not for them. They still need to put into action the gifts that God gave them. It is because they are in motion that they are able to be moved. God's Spirit would serve

no purpose for these people if they were not engaged, just as the wind serves no purpose to an anchored sailboat.

For example, Madeleine L'Engle says, "To work on a book is for me very much the same thing as to pray. Both involve discipline. If the artist works only when he or she feels like it, that person is not apt to build up much of a body of work. Inspiration far more often comes during the work rather than before it."

Most writers, composers, and painters — artists of all kinds — say the same thing: persistence is necessary for creativity and inspiration. There are times when they do not feel like writing, composing, or painting, but if they waited until they felt like it, if they waited until they felt inspired, inspiration would never come. As I said earlier, it is because they are in motion that they are able to be moved.

At age 51, Noah Adams abruptly decided he had to have a piano. He didn't know how to play, but he thought that buying one would compel him to learn. He didn't buy an old clunker or even an inexpensive new one. He invested in a new Steinway upright — a financial commitment that provided extra incentive to practice.

Why does someone decide, as a mature adult, to take up a new activity that involves a steep learning curve? Noah Adams tells us why in a book entitled Piano Lessons. He had long been intrigued with music's evocative power and had become particularly enchanted by watching and interviewing piano players of diverse styles. He loved the beauty of their music, the power of their hands and arms gliding across the keys, and the gift they offered to their audiences.

Yet learning to play was a daunting task. Not surprisingly, Adams found it difficult and frustrating; he couldn't simply sit down and make the beautiful music he wanted. There were scales to learn and basic rhythms to be mastered. Initially, he decided against going to a teacher, trying such shortcuts as a "Miracle Piano Teaching System" on a computer. A friend's warning proved prophetic: "You might be learning music with that computer, but you're not learning how to play."

Eventually, Adams signed up for an intensive ten-day music camp. He discovered there is no substitute for persistent, regular, disciplined practice and the tutelage of teachers. By the end of the first year, his frustrations began to recede. He actually craved time for practice. His persistence paid off.

This is what Jesus was talking about in this parable. In the same way Noah Adams decided to take up the piano as an adult, so many adults these days are deciding to seek out the church. Some had childhood lessons in being a Christian but left the church for many years. Others are coming to the church who have had little if any exposure to the Christian faith.

One temptation is to look for shortcuts, some kind of "Miracle Christian Teaching System in 5 Easy Lessons." But here again, there is no substitute for persistence, for the slow, sometimes painful growth that comes through disciplined habits of practice.

Persistence as a virtue touches every aspect of our living, both spiritual and physical.

But how can we strengthen our persistence? What is the source of that virtue?

First, on a very practical level, you begin to build persistence by breaking through quitting points. The earlier you begin to do this and the more you keep doing it, the stronger your ability to persist will become.

I'm not a jogger or a runner of any kind, but friends of mine who are tell me that the way they build persistence in running is by breaking through quitting points. Let's say your goal is to jog twenty laps on the track. You've been gradually working up to this over a period of time. By the 18th lap, you think you're not going to be able to jog another yard. You've reached a quitting point, but you keep to your goal of twenty laps and break through that quitting point. Our lives are filled with quitting points, and every time we break through, we are building persistence. The widow in the story Jesus told surely broke through many quitting points in her efforts to get justice.

Second, if you want to strengthen the virtue of persistence, you need to connect your life to something greater than yourself. Staying power is always associated with being captured by a just cause, something to which you give your loyalty — a worthy goal in life, a particular vocation.

If I can be personal for a moment, the only thing that kept me from quitting in the earlier years when I began my studies to become a minister was because I felt deep down that I wanted to be a minister and that God wanted me to be a minister. That goal, that vocation, that sense of God's purpose in my life gave me the persistence to work my way through four years of college and four years of seminary.

Here's the story of an elementary school teacher who broke through her quitting points and kept herself connected to something greater than herself. As a result, not only was her persistence strengthened, but she also rekindled another person's persistence and brought about a miracle.

Jean Thompson stood in front of her fifth-grade class on the very first day of school in the fall and told the children her goal: she would strive to love them all the same and treat them all alike. But she knew that was going to be hard to do because there in front of her, slumped in his seat, was a boy named Teddy Stoddard.

Ms. Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed he didn't play well with the other children, that his clothes were unkempt, and that he constantly needed a bath. And Teddy was unpleasant. It got to the point during the first few months that she found herself taking delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen, making bold X's and then marking a big F at the top of the paper.

Because Teddy was a sullen child, no one else seemed to enjoy him either. At the school where Jean Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's records, and she put Teddy's off until last. When she opened his file, she was surprised. His first-grade teacher had written, "Teddy is a bright, inquisitive child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners. He is a joy to be around."

His second-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well-liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle."

His third-grade teacher wrote, “Teddy continues to work hard, but his mother’s death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn’t show much interest, and his home life will soon affect him if steps aren’t taken.”

Teddy’s fourth-grade teacher wrote, “Teddy is withdrawn and doesn’t show much interest in school. He doesn’t have many friends and sometimes sleeps in class. He is tardy and could become a problem.”

By now, Ms. Thompson realized the problem, but Christmas was coming fast. It was all she could do with the school play and all, until the day before the holidays began and she was suddenly forced to focus on Teddy Stoddard. Her children brought her presents, all in beautiful ribbons and bright paper, except for Teddy’s, which was clumsily wrapped in the heavy brown paper of a scissored grocery bag.

She took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a bottle that was one-quarter full of cologne. She stifled the children’s laughter when she exclaimed how beautiful the bracelet was as she put it on and dabbed some of the perfume behind her wrists.

Teddy Stoddard stayed behind long enough to say, “Ms. Thompson, today you smelled just like my mom used to.” After the children left, she cried for an hour. On that day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and speaking. Instead, she began to teach children.

Jean Thompson paid particular attention to one child they all called “Teddy.” As she worked with him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. On days when there was an important test, she would remember that cologne. By the end of the year, he had become one of the best students in class.

A year later, she found a note under her door from Teddy, telling her that of all the teachers he’d had in elementary school, she was his favorite. Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. He wrote that he had finished high school, third in his class, and she was still his favorite teacher of all time. Four years after that, she got another letter saying that, while things had been tough at times, he’d stayed in school, stuck with it, and would graduate with the highest of honors. He assured Ms. Thompson that she was still his favorite teacher. Then four more years passed, and yet another letter came. He explained that after he got his bachelor’s degree, he decided to go further. She was still his favorite teacher, but now his name was a little longer. The letter was signed, Theodore F. Stoddard, M.D.

The story doesn’t end there. There was yet another letter that spring. Teddy said he’d met a young woman and was about to be married. He explained that his father had died a couple of years ago, and he was wondering if Ms. Thompson might agree to sit in the pew usually reserved for the mother of the groom. And guess what? She wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing. And I bet on that special day, Jean Thompson smelled just like the way Teddy remembered his mother smelling on their last Christmas together. Amen.