

Persistence

Persistence is a modifier applied to this text in some translations of the parable given to us by Luke including the one used in our Pew Bibles. Persistence is also the topic of some advice often given to me as I was growing up: if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. It was also the theme behind the children's story about the little train that could. It is easy to focus on the parable from Luke as on the final approach to Jerusalem Jesus' teaching turn to preparing those who follow him for what a life as his disciples will mean in the future. But each of today's texts can be helpful in our life of faith. Together the three texts from Jeremiah, 2nd Timothy and Luke paint a picture of God's ability and willingness to give us what we need. The each serve to teach us what is divinely ordained, to equip us to live in ways that participate in God's will and to experience God's goodness and power personally and in the world. God will write God's law on our hearts as proclaimed by Jeremiah. God has provided us with instructions for righteousness through the Torah, through the prophets, and through Jesus Christ. God does provide justice to the widow. Persistence, faithfulness, patience—these things are important aids as we strive to be witness to God's presence with us amid the injustices which abound in this broken world. Believing this truth motivates people to do extraordinary things in the face of incomprehensible barriers. Jeremiah has now seen the warnings of judgment which he has proclaimed for so many years if the ways of the people did not change come to pass. Many of those who have enjoyed the prosperity gained through their disobedient behavior have been carried away from their homes to reside among foreigners in the land of Babylon. Jeremiah's words now tell them that although this time of exile will not be brief, it will end. Jeremiah acknowledges the pain of the contemporary situation. It cannot be overlooked. He now returns to voicing a part of his call which has been in the background. In addition to the call to announce God's plucking up and pulling down, he was given a call to announce a planting and a building up. Jeremiah's entire life has been spent grappling with God's love of a disobedient people. The disobedience to the Sinai covenant forged many centuries in the past has led to the current hardships. Now Jeremiah can focus on the true hope that awaits God's people in Babylon. Jeremiah's words attack the notion of communal guilt. In verse 29 he makes it clear that children will not be punished for the sins of their parents. No one's destiny is inevitable. Each person's actions play a role in their salvation. In the future just as God will watch over the building and planting which will come, God will also watch over a time when "all shall die for their own sins." Now everyone can make the same choice as Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or not. Earlier in verse 22 Jeremiah has announced that God "has created a new thing on the earth." The Bible invokes the theme of newness repeatedly as God seeks to build relationships with humanity. God had previously gifted Israel with the grace of the law, mediated through Moses and inscribed on stone tablets by God. However, as precious as this was, it was always external to God's people. The renewal and restoration in this passage tells us the law will no longer remain something external: it will be inscribed on the hearts of God's people. It will be completely internalized. Their injustices have led to this state, but God is seeking again to renew their relationship by giving them the teachings internally. This new beginning is also signified by the covenant responsibilities being held individually...dependent upon each person's actions, not those of a parent, not those of a past generation. The companion to the understanding that an individual will not be held

responsible for the past is that now responsibility for the present is theirs. We must consider that as God gathers us into communities, some of the responsibility for obedience for your community is held within that community. Responsibility for just behavior must be held by all members of the community and what they permit as acceptable behavior within the community. Today's passage conveys the message of future hope with these words: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." This covenant is interpreted by Christians as becoming effective with the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth. Jeremiah's words do not specify any time for this "new covenant" to begin and the indications are that the covenant has not changed in any major way in its content. The changes come in how the disobedience of the people is treated. The content to which believers are called to follow has pretty much remained the same. God's people are called to love and care for others; justice is to be done for all. Through Jeremiah's words the people were told their iniquities would be forgiven and their sin would not be remembered, grace is offered. The Lord desires to be known by all as their God and Redeemer as God knows us; the "newness" of the covenant is found in the closeness of the covenant relationship to be formed. God remains committed to humanity, but to a humanity which is obedient to God's vision of human beings. Within Luke's parable we encounter Jesus' teaching on how his followers are to deal with the injustices found in this broken world. Jesus introduces the parable as an instruction for them to always pray and not to lose heart. The situation described by the parable is one about a failure of the system to provide justice for one who belonged to those whose welfare is always a concern of God's. The teaching begins with a judge who is described as neither fearing God nor having respect for people. The widow represents those people who do not receive respect from the system. In this parable the widow, who has no political power and is among those God always numbers among the vulnerable, is so relentless in her pursuit of justice, so bothersome to the judge that she ends up receiving the justice she demands. And the God whom the judge did not fear eclipses the judge who does not fear him by the end of the parable. This parable appears only in Luke's gospel. The image of the widow is placed in the context of, and a lesson in, prayer. Throughout the gospel narratives Jesus is frequently spoken of as being in prayer at key points in his ministry. When the disciples have requested a teaching on prayer, he gives them one which also encourages them to be persistent; to pray daily and to trust in God's faithfulness to them. We are assured that God wants what is best for us, and we may surely assume that God wants to give all that we are told to ask for in the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer. We might sometimes hear that instruction and the one here as reassurance that God is prepared to give us anything we ask for persistently. But Jesus does not say that. Jesus says what God, our Father, wants to give us, and we are to understand that these are the best possible gifts that God could give us, are found in the verses of the Lord's prayer. While this parable is framed by references to prayer and faith, the emphasis in verses 3-8 is on justice and how it figures in the confrontation between the vulnerable justice-seeker and the unjust power-holder. In the end, the powerful and just God take the place of the unjust judge, granting justice to his vulnerable, chosen ones who cry to him day and night. There is only one other use of this term "chosen one" in Luke's gospel. At the end of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, when he is on the cross, he is mocked by the religious leaders, those in power, as "God's chosen one." They, like the unjust judge in the parable, who after granting her justice says: "and will not God grant justice to his chosen ones

who cry to him day and night?" It seems both the unjust judge of the parable and the religious leaders at the foot of the cross inadvertently get it right in spite of themselves. God grants Jesus life as his judgment on all unjust judgements. That is God's answer, God's justice. Perhaps this parable is suggesting that a sign of faith will be a willingness to persist in prayer, as we see in this widow who persists against all odds in her fight for justice against the powerful judge. Another sign of faith may be in what we pray for: daily bread, the Holy Spirit, the kingdom's way to come, justice—Prayer is not easy. It's about asking, seeking, knocking and then waiting. Over and over again...There's no secret recipe. No magic formula. There is just persistence and focus and commitment and discipline. Sometimes the only way to get something right is to keep doing it repeatedly. We just have to stay with it: not only in regard to prayer, but in regard to our whole life of faith. All aspects of our faith that draw us closer to God: Worship, Study, Service, Giving. We just need to keep practicing those things again and again. The more we worship, the more we begin to grasp the height and the depth and the breath of the God we worship. The more we study, the more we understand God's faithfulness. The more we serve, the more we resemble the model of our faith, Jesus Christ, who served God and others with great abandon. The more we give, the more we comprehend that self-giving love is at the very heart of God's life. Doing the right thing, regardless of the outcome, is needed. But most importantly, we rejoice in the faith God writes on our hearts and the hope that comes from knowing how much more God will respond to our cries for justice if even the unjust judge relents out of sheer fatigue. Persistence and practice...listening for those words God has written on our hearts. In this way we will not lose heart in the face of the injustice and brokenness of our world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.