

## “Persistent Faith”

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When I read Luke 18:1–18, the lectionary passage for this week, one word stuck with me—persistent. Specifically, persistent faith. Being persistent means to continue firmly or obstinately in a course of action despite opposition or difficulty, and to continue to exist or endure over a prolonged period. Persistence can be good or bad, depending on what you are being persistent about. So I thought of some examples of persistence in my life that probably shouldn’t have happened and decided that I wouldn’t share those.

I believe that persistence shows up as coincidence a lot of the time. Sometimes, for me, coincidence has actually been God putting me in the position or situation that I am supposed to be in for that specific time. It can be a situation that lasts for a span of time, or it can last for just a moment. A single coincidence can be easily dismissed, but when coincidences are repeated over time, I start to pay attention to them.

For example, I started getting email from the University of Augusta about five years ago telling me about a program for social workers. The first time I got the email, I told myself, “I don’t have the money for that” and deleted it. The next time I received this email, I was doing casework again and had absolutely no time to devote to going back to school even if I were so inclined, so I deleted the email again. The next time I received the email, I was just getting adjusted to my current job, and while the email look sort of interesting, I said, “Nah, I don’t think so” and deleted it again.

When I received this persistent email again last spring and read it, I thought, “Hmm, that sounds interesting.” I went to the UMA website, looked it over, and saw that I could attend an information session via Zoom, so I signed up. At the info session, when I explained that my bachelor’s degree was a hundred years old and in elementary education, I was told that didn’t matter. I went through the application process, thinking, “What’s the worst that can happen?” So now I’m back in school, and while I’m finding it to be a lot of work, I am very interested in the subject matter and learning a lot. If not for the coincidence of persistent emails, I would have been able to happily ignore this interest that I only vaguely realized I had.

Then I started writing, trying to connect this experience to some kind of Biblical context, but it wasn’t working. I had too much school information in my head. So God and I had a talk about why I wasn’t connecting with what I was trying to write to share with you today. Here’s what that sounded like:

Me: “I need help, God. I’ve read the scriptures, and I have an idea. But all I keep writing is words, words, words. What am I not getting?”

God: “Persistence.”

Me: “I know, I know, but I am being persistent. I’m going to church, singing in the choir, going to bell rehearsal, volunteering on the Board of Directors for the food pantry, and keeping up with school. I am being very persistent!”

God: “Persistent? or busy? You are doing a lot, but what have you stopped doing? What persistent thing that feeds your faith have you stopped doing?”

Was I being obstinately persistent, or just being busy? Turns out that I had let go of one of my faith habits. One of my habits is that when I go to bed, I read the *Upper Room* and say a prayer led by the prayer focus for that day. Since I started school again, I had fallen out of this habit. I haven’t had time to read for fun, so I would read a few chapters in my book before bed, but then I’d be so tired that I’d put my book away and turn off the light without doing my *Upper Room* reading or prayer. The first time, I told myself that it was okay, that instead I would just think about the things I should be thankful for that day. But it wasn’t long before I stopped doing even that and just went to sleep. I believe good habits are easier to break than bad ones. After God pointed this out to me, I promptly went back to the faith habit I had abandoned, feeling a little abashed.

Then I had a flash of insight at three o’clock one morning, as I was drifting back to sleep. Remember those parables that Laurel talked about a few weeks ago—the lost sheep and the lost coin? They are examples of persistence. Even the parable of the prodigal son is an example of persistence—the persistence of those who don’t give up. They didn’t give up, and when their persistence paid off, they shared their good news with everyone. The persistence in the parable of the prodigal son is an example of the persistent love of God. God persistently reaches out to us and finds us when we are lost. God takes us back when we have gone our own way and lost sight of where we should be because we were so busy that we left God along the wayside. The father in the parable welcomes his son home with effusive love and throws a party.

I mentioned things that we cling to even though we shouldn’t. This unwillingness to change closes us off to all that we can be. We limit God’s love to a select group and draw it around ourselves like it’s a treasured blanket that is just ours. We cling to our traditions, to our habits and our comfortable ways of doing things. When we cling to our habits and rituals, we limit what God can do with us.

Sometimes we are persistent because we have no choice but to move forward and trust that God will lead us. After two years of planning and dreaming, we are actually building a home for the food pantry. A group of people got together and persisted in dreaming of the possibility in this project. Several members of this group persisted in looking for sources of money that could be used, and they found a donor willing to give us a large amount for our dream. I stood here at our annual meeting last July and announced that construction probably wouldn’t begin this year, but our project manager was diligently persisting with talking to contractors. We had to move forward! The pantry needs its own space, and our church family needs to get back to fellowship together like the community of faith we are. We have no choice.

We don't have a pastor right now. We can figure out how we can do this shared faith thing, or we can wither away while we wait for someone to come and fill the role of pastor. Right now, persistent faith is the critical element in our walk with God along this new and unsure path. Will we make mistakes? Of course we will. Old habits die hard, and it's hard not to give up in the face of what may seem like a daunting challenge. Psalm 119:96 says, "I see the limits to everything human, but the horizons can't contain your commands."

Luckily, God is persistent with us. Persistent in loving us, persistent in being there and waiting for us, and persistent in giving us those coincidences to remind us of where we should be and what we should be doing. Persistent in the face of our excuses, our past failures, our unwillingness, and our lack of belief in ourselves.

Faith isn't easy. It takes commitment and consistency. In Luke, it doesn't say that the widow had faith, but she persistently advocated for her rights even when others might have given up. Certainly the judge had no faith except in himself and the love of his position. But the widow wore him down, just like water or wind wear rock down in the erosion process. The judge surrendered because he wanted the widow to go away and leave him alone. He threw up his hands and exclaimed, "Enough already!" Sound familiar?

Is there a recipe for faith? Well, if only it were that easy—two teaspoons of this, one tablespoon of that, and a cup of whatever else. Instead, faith is different for everyone, and we all come to it from different backgrounds and perspectives. So there is no single recipe to follow, but there are ways we are told to practice our faith. For today's purpose, I am calling them Coincidence, Commitment, and Conditioning. Many other words could be used, but these were the first three that came to mind, so I'm going with them.

I already talked about coincidence. Then there's commitment, being dedicated to a cause or activity. That actual sitting down and doing the thing that has been persistently pestering you. When you say, "All right, God, I'll do it already!" Why do we need to be pestered into commitment? Some people commit to everything and get burned out, while others commit to nothing for fear of being disappointed or disappointing others. Once you have been burned or disappointed, it's hard to look at committing to a cause or activity again.

Conditioning in psychology is when you are consciously or unconsciously trained to do something. The most common frame of reference is Pavlov's dogs. Pavlov found that when he rang a bell and fed his dogs, they salivated, and when he did that often enough, he could ring the bell and the dogs would salivate thinking they were going to be fed whether he fed them or not. Sounds disappointing for the dogs if you ask me, but it is an example of classic conditioning.

What are we conditioned to do? Maybe it's better to ask, what are your faith habits? A habit is an activity or routine that is done so regularly that it can be done unconsciously. According to psychologists, it takes sixty-six days to develop a habit, and it takes four to six months of behavioral conditioning to break a negative habit. Let's not get so wrapped up in our habits and limit what God can do *with* us.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't have a pastor. I'm saying that we need to look at our habits and figure out what God wants us to let go of—and what God wants us to reach for. In a Daily Devotional this week, Vicki Kemper writes, “Psalm 121 is not about beautiful hills. It is about taking an honest look at whatever stands between us and well-being—and trusting that God will make a way through. It is an invitation to ask the Holy One for help, and to recognize God *when help comes.*” I believe that God shows up in strange and unexpected ways in order to shake us out of our habits. As Kemper writes, “From where will our help come? From God, who *may* show up *how* and *when* we *least* expect it.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kemper, Vicki. “Where Help Comes From.” *UCC Daily Devotional*, 10-12-22. <https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/>. Emphasis added.