

Homily – Keep Praying

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Have you ever felt like giving up? Throwing in the towel? Leaving the ministry, or quitting the God stuff?

In telling the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus acknowledges that quitting the journey is a real possibility. He was, after all, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. His own cry of abandonment expressed the specter of defeat.

When Jesus scandalized some of his followers, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Jesus then asked his closest followers, "Do you want to leave too?"

People quit church, or even worse, quit God, for many reasons — hypocrisy, boredom, legalistic pettiness, superficial platitudes, unanswered prayers, bitter disappointments, and intellectual doubts.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus encourages us "always to pray and not to lose heart." He tells a story about a persistent widow who persisted with a corrupt judge. She never gave up, despite the many injustices she experienced at the hands of the judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people."

There's no mysterious meaning here. The parable is straightforward. Despite our feelings of fighting a losing battle, of supporting a losing cause, don't give up. Keep praying. Author George Bernanos writes in his book "Diary of a Country Priest," "Keep marching to the end, and try to end up quietly at the roadside without shedding your equipment."

And, in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the elves of Lothlorien admit that they're losing their forest lands. But they battle on. They describe their struggle as "fighting the long defeat." Fighting the long defeat.

And, Tolkien is probably the source of the comment made by Paul Farmer, who has fought a "losing battle" for health care for the poor. In Tracy Kidder's biography of Farmer called "Mountains Beyond Mountains," Farmer says, "I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I actually think sometimes we may win. I don't dislike victory... We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers, no, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat."

And, in his emotionally volatile poem *The Collar*, George Herbert considered quitting faith and the ministry. Born to wealth and privilege, Herbert rejected a faculty post at Cambridge University and public service as a Member of Parliament, and in 1629 became the rector at Bemerton, a small village near Salisbury, England. He spent the rest of his short life as a country cleric, despite the protests of his family and friends that it was beneath his dignity.

The title of Herbert's poem evokes the stiff clerical collar that he wore; he complains that it's choking the life out of him. The poem begins with a tirade in which he is pounding the church altar on which he would have served the Eucharist — bam! — and screaming what many believer has felt but dared not express: "No more. I quit." Here is the poem in all of its old English glory. You can follow along on your screen or with the handout.

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
 I will abroad.
 What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
 My lines and life are free; free as the rode,
 Loose as the winde, as large as store.
 Shall I be still in suit?
 Have I no harvest but a thorn
 To let me bloud, and not restore
 What I have lost with cordiall fruit?
 Sure there was wine
 Before my sighs did drie it: there was corn
 Before my tears did drown it.
 Is the yeare onely lost to me?
 Have I no bayes to crown it?
 No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?
 All wasted?
 Not so, my heart: but there is fruit,
 And thou hast hands.
 Recover all thy sigh-blown age
 On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
 Of what is fit and not. Forsake thy cage,
 Thy rope of sands,
 Which pettie thoughts have made, and made to thee
 Good cable, to enforce and draw,
 And be thy law,
 While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
 Away; take heed:
 I will abroad.
 Call in thy deaths head there: tie up thy fears.
 He that forbears
 To suit and serve his need,
 Deserves his load.
 But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
 At every word,
 Me thoughts I heard one calling, Child!
 And I reply'd, My Lord.

Herbert's poem is full of images of constraint, against which he rebels — his clerical collar, cables, a cage, ropes, laws, and his stuffy suit. He chafes at the conformity imposed upon him, and dreams about a life "free as the road, loose as the wind, as large as store." Why not cut and run?

He complains that his reward for ministerial service is a harvest of thorns. He wonders if he's wasted his years. Did he miss out on life and ambition? He regrets the pleasures and privileges that he forfeited. Perhaps he should have stayed in Cambridge and London?

The poem then comes full circle. Herbert concludes that the real "ropes," "cage," and "cables" that bind him are not the gospel or ministerial service but his own "pettie thoughts." In fact, the more "fierce and wilde" he raved, the more in his heart of hearts he "heard one calling, Child!" The poem ends with a robust recommitment of faith to "My Lord."

Some readers detect a note of self-pity in Herbert's poem, or deliberate exaggeration for rhetorical effect. I read *The Collar* as a candid expression of the deeply human questions that normal people ask on the journey with Jesus. Authentic spirituality includes rather than excludes whatever is bothering you most.

In the New Testament reading for this week, from his second letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul describes his own persistence amidst many years of struggles. He encourages Timothy by writing: "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it... endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully."

Our own day has its own heroes of persistence despite the apparent futility of just causes. This last week the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to human rights advocate Ales Bialiatski from Belarus, the Russian human rights organization Memorial and the Ukrainian human rights organization Center for Civil Liberties. In announcing the award the Noble Foundation wrote that the Peace Prize laureates represent civil society in their home countries. They have for many years persevered and promoted the right to criticize power and protect the fundamental rights of citizens. They have made an outstanding effort to document war crimes, human right abuses and the abuse of power. Together they demonstrate the significance of civil society for peace and democracy

In conclusion, in persistence we savor small victories. We acknowledge our limited options and make the best of a bad situation. We resist despair. Most of all, says Jesus, we stay in relationship with God, keep praying, and don't give up.