

## Persistence in a World of Instant Gratification – Brian Hartley

Jeremiah 31:27-34; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Completing even a 5K race is no longer as easy as it once was. I am not going to lie to you—the last half-mile or so hurt, no matter how long or short the distance. But, whenever I start feeling grumpy and muttering lines about how youth is wasted on the young, I think of runners like Maickel Melamed, the 38-year-old Venezuelan who finished the Chicago marathon last weekend. Melamed had the distinction of finishing dead last out of a field of more than 40,000 people. It took him 16 hours and 46 minutes to cross the finish line at after 1 a.m. By the time he completed the race, the streets were reopened, the mats and medical tents torn down, and even the clock had been dismantled for over six hours. But, when Maickel came across the finish line, a team of tearful friends was there waiting for him to begin the celebration. You see, Melamed, an economist by training, suffers from a rare condition which limits his muscle strength and makes every single step painful and laborious. But, despite his muscular dystrophy, Maickel has not only completed the Chicago marathon, but similar runs in New York and Berlin.

What makes such a feat so compelling is that we live in a world that has a very different definition of success. Just enter into your Google search engine the phrase, “winning is everything,” and take a look at all of the items that come up. This past week, PBS ran its debut “Frontline” program which outlined in details how the NFL, despite all the evidence to the contrary, did all that it could to not only hide the mounting evidence about the danger of concussions in football, but went out of its way to smear the reputations of anyone who said otherwise. Too much money was on the line. Injuries, life-threatening or not, are irrelevant. We want to be a nation of winners, at any cost. After all, who, in their right mind, pays any attention to the last person to cross the finish line?

I want to suggest that today’s scripture lessons all call us to re-evaluate this cultural mantra and challenge us to a radically different way of living our lives. To be a Christian means to follow a Jesus who would have been branded by the toughest machismo power of the age (the Roman Empire) as the ultimate loser. His passion and death portray for them and for those like them the ultimate indignation and disgrace. Beaten into submission until he was almost unrecognizable, covered with his own blood, sweat, urine, and feces, he experienced complete degradation and humiliation. He was no Rocky or Braveheart, but just one more pitiful, small, Jewish peasant who got in the way of the Pax Romana. Which makes today’s gospel lesson even more intriguing.

I remember as a kid once hearing a preacher interpret this narrative as a call to nag God with our numerous prayers of petition. “If an unbeliever can nag, so can we,” seemed to be the life lesson for that evangelist. But the key to the story is found, I believe, in the framework which the Evangelist uses to explain why the parable is told in the first place. Now, remember, that

the writer of Luke's gospel is using the story of Jesus to speak to folks living at least a generation after this story. There was a world of chaos and disintegration. The temple was gone and the city of Jerusalem put to the sword and still Jesus was nowhere in sight. Hadn't he been the one to instruct them to pray, "thy Kingdom come"? Why hadn't his Kingdom come as they had thought?

So, Luke begins today's lesson: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart," (18:1). All of which might suggest that there were, indeed, some who were losing heart and not continuing in prayer. As they looked around at the bleak landscape left behind by the Roman army, I'm sure they must have wondered where God was. With so much change all around them—faced with the loss of the mother church in Jerusalem, the death of the first disciples, and the seemingly overwhelming power of Rome—they probably were considering abandoning what little faith they may have had.

Given such a predicament, perhaps they were hoping that Jesus would conjure up an image of the rich and powerful—a successful Jewish merchant or even a gladiator-type. But, instead, Luke has Jesus encountering a widow woman. While any woman unattached to a man in the Roman world was relatively powerless, widows were particularly defenseless—oftentimes left to beg in the streets. So marginalized were they that they had little hope of any kind of justice. This woman faced almost impregnable barriers. She has no male advocate and so must resort to verbally ambushing the judge whose reputation was one of brutal negligence. Jesus leaves little doubt that the one with the power in this story sees her as simply a nuisance. In fact, the text describes the widow's actions as nothing short of bothersome—like some insect that refuses to go away despite one's best swatting efforts.

The image that is being offered here is one of patience, ingenuity, and persistence—and all of this by a character not meant to elicit our deepest emotions. This portrait of the gospel is not the one we hear preached so often these days about how God will take away your pain, give you a Mercedes, or help you find your life's mate. This is no God of the suburbs, let alone the gated community. This is a god who isn't about fixing things, as much as giving us the capacity and courage to get through that which appears to be unbearable. We want what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace," while Jesus "bids us come and die." We want to say the Sinner's Prayer and be able to get on with the rest of our lives—with coffee in the foyer and church league softball in the summers. We want Easy Street, complete with healthful skin, exciting job prospects, and a pain-free death. But, instead, this passage seems to suggest, we aren't promised any of this stuff. We are like those characters in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews with no guarantees whatsoever—just a calling to learn to be faithful.

And the shape of that faithfulness becomes even clearer in today's second lesson.

This text reflects the chaos and uncertainty that prevailed throughout Asia Minor in the fledgling churches established by the apostle Paul. By the latter portion of the first century, there was all kinds of sectarian politics at work in the church and a battle for the heart of the gospel. This

internal strife and dissension was characterized by the rise of false teachers and prophets. The recipient of the letter has just heard that “in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of”—and then he lists off a whole truckload of despicable adjectives to categorize the sinfulness of the culture in which he finds himself. By all means, the writer says, avoid them!

But providing a list of behaviors to avoid really doesn't do much for most of us. I have found over the years that in the preparation of syllabi students can only handle so many rules. Harping on about not doing this or that only guarantees a mental shutdown and a persistent image that the professor is spilling over into elderly senescence where one tends to blivate on and on about how the world is going to hell in a hand-basket and the current generation is veering dangerously close to the end of civilization as we know it. And so, we look for a way of encapsulating what we want to say in a more positive way—a way in which to leave a legacy for those who wish to follow us. In education, we call such a venture a “rubric”—what Carnegie Mellon calls “a scoring tool that explicitly represents the performance expectations for an assignment or piece of work.”

Well, that's just what we get in this passage of scripture. This is nothing less than a rubric which establishes enduring patience and persistence as the performance goal for the next generation. And what is so interesting about these words of advice is that they are grounded in a view that the past contains the key to success in the future. For the apostle, the past provides not only a precedent on which to act, but the necessary components for providing the people of God with the stability necessary to navigate the waters of chaos that lie yet ahead. And, like any good teacher, he divides the rubric into three parts.

First, he says, “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed.” This, most certainly, is an appeal to the past—Timothy's past training through his family, the community of faith, and the sacred texts (most likely of the Septuagint, the emerging canon of Jewish scriptures in Greek). This is an appeal to the trustworthiness of the early Christian tradition made known to the recipient through the lives of Paul and the early Christians as they interpreted and lived out the meaning of these sacred texts through the larger story of Jesus. Timothy is reminded that returning to this larger tradition is what will make him “proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Paul understands here that we all live out of our memories and that it is only as we reflect on the past that we really learn much of anything. Think about a wedding. Nobody learns anything at the time of the rehearsal. Everyone is hurrying around to make sure that the wedding party is complete and that grandma's slip isn't riding down below her knees. And the day of the ceremony is even worse. The bride is coming up the aisle with tears running down her face and her father worried about the bill. And the poor groom—all he can think about is not passing out or saying the wrong words. Everybody is simply content to get through it all. But fifty years later, as she lies in bed struggling for her breath and riddled with cancer, there's that same guy holding her hand and remembering how radiant she looked coming down the aisle. And those words he worried about forgetting are now taking on a life all their own: “for better, for worse; for

richer, for poorer; in plenty, and in want; till death do us part.” Though the moments of rehearsal and the event itself passed rather quickly, the memory of that day has become the ground for a lifetime of reflection and learning.

Moving next from the first set of instructions which are centered in remembering, rehearsing, and reliving his past inheritance, the writer then focuses on how these values get lived out through teaching and preaching. “Proclaim the message,” the apostle says, “be persistent.” Just as with the story of the widow in today’s gospel lesson, the model here is one of “keeping on.” In English, the text peppers us with alliteration of “p’s”: from proclamation and persistence to patience. If the focus in the first section was on the trustworthiness of his inherited past, the focus here is on paying attention to the everyday, the ordinary, and the mundane in order to flesh out the vocation to which he has been called. And the challenge is to both exercise patience and encourage people on the one hand, while educating their desires without compromising doctrine for the sake of appeal—a feat I oftentimes refer to as learning to “ride the barbed-wire fence” (Brazos Commentary, 160). Such a model suggests both moderation and vulnerability.

And, finally, closing out the section, he says, “as for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.” Paul’s eye here is upon the entirety of the work to which his young protégé has been called. And, as Risto Saarinen has commented, the capacity of the leader to endure suffering, “points out that the desires of an exemplary leader are to be moderated so that the leader’s mind is not shaken by varying external circumstances and internal affections, but remains firm,” (Brazos Commentary, 160).

Much more could be said here of this model of leadership embedded in the Pastoral Epistles, but what should stand out for all of us are the same qualities that propelled Maickel Melamed across the finish line—sheer grit and determination despite the fact that the winners have been announced, the paraphernalia packed away, and the crowds have moved on. In times of ebb and flow, and especially during times of crisis, what is most needed is persistence. And what the scriptures announce today, blatantly and boldly, is that persistence is the result of maturity forged through habituated behavior, and sustained by the community’s holy memory.

One group of people who have modeled this kind of persistence and have been helpful to me in this regard are the Benedictine monks who I have befriended at places like St. John’s in Minnesota and St. Meinrad’s in Indiana. Today I have brought with me my “bobble-head” Brother Maurus—a representation of the guest master at St. Meinrad’s Archabbey. Maurus Zeller is an ordinary monk—a member of the laity, not the clergy. His gifts are primarily in administration and for many years he helped oversee the small press they have at the monastery. But, a few decades ago, the abbot asked Br. Maurus to take over as guest master and to see to the greeting and accommodation of guests. For the Benedictines, showing hospitality to all who venture their way is embedded in their rule and in their DNA, so this is no small role.

Some of you alums who are here today may have been with me on our monastic trip and may remember Maurus—a gregarious and fast-paced soul, who does his dead-level best to greet you warmly, whisk you across the monastery grounds, and see that your questions are answered, usually with a bit of comedy thrown in. In this way, he has catered to the needs of literally thousands of people...including two little old ladies who appeared on the monastery's doorstep about twenty years ago. They weren't very different from many others Maurus had met. In fact, many of the visitors these days are older folks who are looking for a bit of quiet and reflection. Word has it that Maurus joked with the women, showed them around the grounds, even poured them a glass of wine from the monastery's stores, and then wished them good-bye. This was something he would do thousands of times, day in and day out, for countless others.

About ten years later, the monastery was getting ready to launch a capital campaign. Their guest hosting was becoming somewhat aged and decrepit and an architect had drawn up plans for a new guest house. Other items were also in need of repair or restoration. The grand total was some \$40 million—a tidy sum for a group of monks to try and raise. So, they began to pray and to plan when they got a call from a lawyer who asked to meet with the Abbot. To make a rather long story short, it seems that the two little old ladies that Maurus had wined and dined that day had been so impressed by the reception they had received and the work of the monastery that they had written St. Meinrad's into their wills. And when both of them had passed on and their estates had cashed out, their final net worth was somewhere in the neighborhood of \$27 million—all of which they left to the monastery. So, if you go to St. Meinrad's today, you will see that the new guest house is named after these women and the little bobble-head I sport today was struck in honor of Br. Maurus's hospitality and generosity.

Such big miracles are rather rare but oftentimes occur because of the faithfulness of God's people and the perseverance of those who are engaged in following Jesus. Today marks the end of Homecoming and, come tomorrow, all of us will return to our workaday world—a world that can oftentimes seem monotonous and difficult. But God's word for us today is to persist—despite all of the hoopla that surrounds our culture bent on winning at all costs. For, it is through such faithfulness that the work of the gospel will go forward and God's Kingdom will surely come. Amen.