

Commentary to the 29th Sunday In Ordinary Time (C)



Persistence in Prayer

The opening reading and the Gospel reading for this Sunday present the theme of persevering in prayer. The first is a scene full of adventure. The Gospel reading is humorous. The message is the same.

The first reading is from the Book of Exodus. The enemies of the Hebrews, Amalek, challenged them to a decisive battle. Joshua led the troops of Israel. Moses watched from a distant hill with the staff of God, the source of power in his hand. Moses' brother Aaron and his companion Hur stayed with Moses. As long as Moses' arms were raised holding the staff, the power of God, the Israelites were winning, but when Moses' arms came down, the Amalekites were winning. His companions held his arms up. The position of his raised up arms is that of ancient prayer. As long as Moses remained united to God in prayer, God's power prevailed. He couldn't do it alone, he needed the support of others, Aaron holding one arm, Hur the other. Even with their help, it took all Moses had to remain in prayer. He did it. He persevered.

The gospel is also meant to demonstrate perseverance in prayer, only it is presented in a humorous fashion. Jesus tells of a town where there is a dishonest, corrupt judge who couldn't care about anyone

or anything. Nobody, neither God nor man, can tell him what to do. Then he meets Mabel, or whatever her name was. This lady wouldn't give it a rest. She knew she was in the right, and she wanted that judge to rule for her. She badgered him night and day. "I fear neither God nor man," the unjust judge says, "but this lady is going to finish me off. I'll give her what she wants to shut her up." Obviously, the judge also worked in a Catholic rectory. Anyway, the humorous story makes the point that persistence and perseverance pay off both in this world and in the next.

Many years ago, Frank Sinatra sang a song called "High Hopes." Remember the lyrics:

Just what makes that little old ant

Think he'll move that rubber tree plant

Anyone knows an ant, can't

Move a rubber tree plant

But he's got high hopes, he's got high hopes

He's got high apple pie, in the sky hopes

So any time your gettin' low

'stead of lettin' go

Just remember that ant

Oops there goes another rubber tree plant.

Jesus told his disciples, "pray always without becoming weary." The widow kept pestering the wicked judge until he gave her a just decision. We might sing, "Oops, there goes another wicked judge." Moses kept his arms raised in prayer until the Israelites won. "Oops, there goes some more Amalekites."

Perseverance works. All of life experience tells us, stick-to- it, set the goal and keep at it. A good example is heart transplant surgery. This is now pretty routine, with a waiting list, but it is due to the hard work of the late Dr. Christiaan Barnard. Dr. Barnard had an idea and saw it through. First, he learned open-heart surgery. Then, he experimented with heart transplants in dogs, and gained experience with immune suppression drugs used with kidney transplant patients. Practiced and ready to try his heart surgery techniques on a human, Dr. Barnard took the heart of an automobile accident victim and transplanted it into one of his patients. Of his first ten heart transplants, two survived over ten years, one over twenty-four years.

Keep trying, don't give up. Robert Frost published his first poem at age 16, in his high school newspaper. But, he wrote poems for another 23 years before he sold a single poem. Albert Einstein once said, "I think and think for months and years. Ninety-nine times, my conclusions are false. The hundredth time I am right." President Calvin Coolidge put it this way, "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not. Genius will not. Education will not." Persistence and determination bring success.

Jesus told his disciples, "pray always without becoming weary." By pestering the judge, the widow got what she wanted. The Israelites defeated Amalek as long as Moses prayed. All of life experience tells us, stick-to-it, set the goal and keep at it.

But, why do we pray? Why do we pester God with persistent prayer? God knows our needs. We do not have to tell God what we need! We do not have to keep badgering God until God meets our needs. God knows our needs and is eager to meet them. So, why pray?

The most obvious reason we pray is that Jesus told us to pray. Luke's Gospel records the words of Christ, "Ask, and it will be given to you." Jesus tells us in John's Gospel, "If you ask for anything in my name, I will do it." In today's gospel Christ encourages us to pray. We tell God our needs in prayer because Jesus told us to.

The good news is that when we pray, something happens. We change. The widow got justice, the Israelites won. For us, we keep praying, and we become people who pray. We pray to focus in on God. Prayer forces us from self-reliance to dependence on God. When we're close to God by prayer, we live a God-centered life.

Jesus says the most important thing about prayer is to "pray without becoming weary." So we keep raising our arms to God in prayer. We keep pestering God in prayer. And we are not surprised when we move another rubber tree plant.

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