

The Path of Much Persistence

Luke 18:1-8 Preached FCCW 10-20-2013

Emmitt Smith used to be a running back for the Dallas Cowboys. Back in 2002, Emmitt set the NFL rushing record- a record that still stands-at 16,743 yards. It took him 13 years to reach that milestone. Which is a pretty impressive lifetime achievement. Until you do the math and figure out that 16,743 yards turns out to be... only a little over 9.5 miles. I cover that much distance every week, just walking Satya around town.

Of course, the difference is – when I walk Satya, I don't have the defensive linemen of the Chicago Bears or Green Bay Packers doing their best to keep me from getting where I want to go. And if by chance some morning, I did, my response would not be to try to bull my way through them. My response would be to find a different route to take. That is called, taking the Path of Least Resistance.

It is human nature to choose the Path of Least Resistance in life whenever possible. But on a football field your room to maneuver in order to avoid pain and suffering is only as wide as the distance from one sideline to the other. If you want to reach the goal there is only one way to get there. Running straight into the thing you'd rather avoid. Again, and again, and again.

That's how Emmitt Smith gained his record setting yardage. The average yardage he gained per run, on his way to accumulating those 16,743 record setting yards was 4.3 yards per carry. And almost every one of those 4.3-yard gallops ended with a bone crunching tackle by some beast of a linebacker. Do the math on that and you find out that Smith was tackled almost 4000 times on his way to football glory. And what did he do after each one of those 4000 tackles? He got back up and got ready to run again. THAT is not choosing the Path of Least Resistance. That is what you call taking the Path of Much Persistence.

Jesus knew firsthand how challenging it can be to follow The Path of Much Persistence when it comes to running the race of faith. Early in his ministry the Devil tempted Jesus to choose the Path of Least Resistance in order to spare himself from the cross. Jesus instead chose to follow the Path of Much Persistence because he knew that persistence against injustice is the only real road to the Kingdom of God. Shortly after, he witnessed how deadly his resistance could be, when Herod had John the Baptist executed.

As he neared the end of his final journey to Jerusalem and the end of his earthly life, he knew that his followers would soon have to choose for themselves which road they would follow. Very often, following Jesus means setting aside the luxury of simply doing whatever I want to do, in order to discern what God's will for me might be. Jesus understood how difficult it can be for us to persevere at doing the right thing instead of losing heart and choosing the Path of Least Resistance.

So, he gave us a parable about choosing the Path of Much Persistence. It's a story about a judge and a widow. The judge is not a very good judge. A judge's job was to interpret and apply the law, and the law was designed to enforce justice by protecting the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Widows were at the top of that list. Yet, this judge shows no compassion for the widow who comes to him seeking justice. But she persists in petitioning him for her rights. She finally wears him down until he gives her the justice she is seeking. He gives in, not because it is his duty. Not because it is the right thing to do. Not because he has a change of heart. He does it to get her off his back. He grants the widow the justice she is seeking because that is the Path of Least Resistance to ending her persistent harassment.

That's the kind of persistence that Jesus says his followers will need to have in order for them to see the Kingdom of God on earth. Because there always will be times when we will need a determination such as the widow demonstrated in this parable. We still live in a world where not everyone is as interested in justice for all as in privilege for themselves. And if you and I are going to go against that grain by being advocates for justice, compassion and peace, then we'd better expect that we will encounter plenty of resistance, just like the widow did.

Now, Jesus is not saying that we need to twist God's arm to get Him to do the right thing, the way the widow had to harass this judge. What he is saying is that, if a widow's persistence can get a corrupt judge who only cares about himself to pay attention to her needs and settle a case in her favor, how much more should we have faith, when we are faced with some problem or obstacle, knowing that God does care about us, and how eagerly God does want to see justice done?

Remember the reason Jesus told this parable?

So that his disciples would pray always and not lose heart.

Think about that. Jesus would not tell a parable encouraging us to pray always and not lose heart unless he knew that when everything looks hopeless, we will get tempted to lose heart and just give up without having faith in God's willingness, that can inspire us to persist.

But, there's another way to hear what this parable says. In our discussion of this passage in our Worship Connections meeting, someone pointed out that you could also read this parable as though God is the persistent widow and we are like the unjust judge. When read that way, the parable reminds us that like the widow, God is persistently knocking at the door of our conscience, stirring us from the slumber of our comfort zones and rousing us to the Kingdom work of justice building and peacemaking. Which then turns the judge into an incarnation of our own human resistance to answering God's call to do the right thing, when doing the right thing is uncomfortable or inconvenient.

Being the Church is not easy in a world that doesn't always appreciate the value of what the Church stands for. When the world seems so broken and the powers blocking the way to a

more just and peaceful future seem so formidable, the path of least resistance starts to look pretty attractive.

After telling this parable of the widow who showed persistent faith, Jesus asked, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find such faith on earth?" When Jesus returns, will he find disciples who are persistent about living faithfully in spite of the difficulties and obstacles that life puts in our way? Or will he find disciples who choose the Path of Least Resistance; who hope that if they don't answer the call, God will try knocking on someone else's door instead?

The early church assumed Jesus' return would happen sooner than later. Their hope that the Path of Most Persistence would be a sprint rather than a marathon kept their legs churning against the opposition they faced. 2000 years later, the urgency around Jesus' Second Coming has worn off. And with it, much of the urgency about taking the Path of Much Persistence.

Will Jesus find faith on earth when he returns? More importantly for us this morning – does he find faith in you and me-in the choices we make, here and now? As Jesus once said, "I stand at the door and knock." While we are following the Path of Least Resistance as we wait for him to come back some day, we miss the sound of him knocking on our doors today.

Your presence here proves you made one faithful choice already this morning. You persisted in getting up and dressed and coming here. You didn't choose the Path of Least Resistance, which could have been to sleep in, or putter around the house or watch TV. Might there be something else that God is calling you to do?

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge shows us the kind of persistent faith that Christ hopes to find in each of us, even in the face of life's obstacles. The kind of faith that doesn't get left behind as a result of our tendency towards taking the Path of Least Resistance.

May we, as individuals and as a church, strive to demonstrate that kind of faith in our lives.

May we pray persistently for God to supply the faith we need when our own faith is exhausted.

And may we pray for hearts that are open to receive it, so that we keep going forward on the Path of Much Persistence.