

**GOING DEEPER: THE SPIRITUAL VIRTUE OF TENACITY; LUKE 18:1-8; 10.20.19;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

When we were in Monterosso, Italy it took me a while to adjust. I felt a vague sense of entrapment. Monterosso is one of the five towns of Cinque Terre. The region is a cliff-dominated seacoast in the northwest corner of Italy, on the Ligurian Sea. The roads into the towns are steep and narrow, layered in switch-backs to ascend and descend the mountains. Nearly every car reveals signs of trying to make these one-way roads in two-way lanes – dangling mirrors, scrapes and scratches on the sides of vehicles.

Everything is up and down, only the sea is flat. The five towns of Cinque Terre are small beachheads that attracted dwellers centuries ago. Pirates were the first to settle there. They prized the easily defended isolation. But those who stayed built houses and churches and existed by fishing and farming.

Yet, these are not America's farms that run to the horizon. The farms of Cinque Terre are vertical, terraced down the sides of the mountains. Stone walls bolster them to keep crops from sliding into the sea. One day I realized every one of the stones used to build the walls or to lay the paths that link the towns together and network up and down the mountains had to be hauled, cut to fit and placed in position. We're talking untold numbers of years of labor and maintenance. Not to mention planting and harvesting crops. The redeeming feature is that *anything* will grow in this region because of the fertile soil, relentless sun and generous rainfall.

I will never forget one of the farm hands at our villa who I saw early one morning walking up from the tomato rows that were several hundred feet – about twelve floors - down the hillside. His large basket was full of big, beautiful, ripe tomatoes. The basket must have weighed a ton. The man was easily in his mid 70s. But he climbed the hill and hauled the tomatoes like a young man.

I saw the look on his face and recognized it everywhere among the Monterossians – from shop keepers, to truck drivers, to waitresses, to fishers, and especially among the old folks sitting in the piazzas or playing bocci. It was the look of perseverance: a chiseled face with a thousand-yard stare and deeply tanned neck and arms. You don't live in Cinque Terre and make it unless you are well-acquainted with and practice the tenacity it takes to survive there.

This morning's story of the widow and the unjust judge is about tenacity, perseverance in our prayers. It follows a story in Luke about Jesus' triumphant return... someday. It is a parable about persisting in hope even when that hope is not immediately fulfilled. My guess is that the widow of the story today had that chiseled, tanned, steely-eyed look. She was the real deal and no match, in the end, for this judge who ruled and lived as he pleased, fearing no one, Luke says, neither God nor man, until this powerless, vulnerable widow comes along with her persistent complaint.

A Christ like life requires we think, perhaps, the seven spiritual virtues – prudence, temperance, courage, justice, faith, hope and love; but I'd like to add tenacity to that list: gritty determination that doesn't give up, can intimidate a corrupt judge and keeps at bay the powers of darkness that haunt human existence.

Perseverance may seem more a trait for soldiers or athletes but Luke tells us it is indispensable for anyone who aspires to follow Jesus.

Why does Luke hold up the widow's persistence as a spiritual virtue and the way to pray? Because, if you read between the lines in Luke, his message is clear: we have the capacity to be Christ like some of the time, but we are, as someone said and Luke illustrates, pigs the rest of the time – that is to say, we succumb to our animal instincts rather than setting aside our self-interest which is so easily attracted to and jostles at the trough of the seven deadly sins: greed, gluttony, lust, envy, pride, anger and sloth.

Maybe that sounds a bit harsh on this beautiful fall Sunday morning but I'll bet everyone of us knows when we've crossed the line from responsibility to loved ones, hard work, self-care, and duty to community into some world of rationalization that tries to disguise our character flaws or deny our broken promises, or explain away our violations of trust.

The fact is, Luke says, we are not naturally given to live like Christ in our daily travels. To make his point, he is the gospel writer who holds up all of the lowly, shady, marginalized people as exemplars of faith and the upright religious people as the ones who don't get it. In fact the very disciples in Luke are illustrative of every human flaw in the book – constantly missing the point, stroking their egos, taking the path of least resistance.

And just in case his readers might take persistence in prayer as all we have to do to get what we want, Luke links it to prayer for the Holy Spirit. In his introduction to prayer, a few chapters back, where he teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells a parable, much like the one today, of a man who goes to his neighbor at night to ask for bread for his children; but the neighbor tells him he is in bed and to go away. Yet, because the man persists, the neighbor gets out of bed and gives the man bread for his family.

Then Jesus compares the love and compassion of God to this calloused neighbor as he does today when he compares God's quick justice for his children to the hard won, delayed justice of the corrupt judge and says, "how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

Here's the catch: when we pray for the Holy Spirit we let go of our remedies for life's problems; we surrender our power and control; we become as vulnerable as the widow and as poor as the unemployed father who asks for bread. But here's the great secret to the power of the Holy Spirit – like a sports endurance event, if you stick with your training, you always get a second wind. Likewise the Holy Spirit is God's second wind, if we persist, if we hold on, if we ask God again for help and hope, it comes.

The One to whom we surrender, says Jesus, is trustworthy, which is why he compares him on two occasions to human beings who, after persistent requests for help, finally give in to the petitions made to them. How much more, Jesus says, will the God who created and cares for and loves you come to your aid.

The caveat is that the aid or answers we get when we place our own or our loved ones' wellbeing, when we place our hopes and fears living in the kind of world we are living in now into the providence of God – when we place our longing and needs before God – what we get is what we need even though it may take time to see what felt like less than we needed or less an answer to prayers, turned out to be exactly the right door opening or closing at the right time in a series of events that led to opportunities and well-being we never could have imagined.

A healthy dose of patience goes a long way as we pray for the Holy Spirit with tenacity. Patience and tenacity in prayer will keep our souls.

I said tenacity and perseverance is usually a trait associated with soldiers and athletes. I know from triathlons, if you'll excuse the sports metaphor, all the training guides and programs tell you to develop your core muscles. Tenacity is the core muscles of faith.

In endurance events the core muscles go first – the core is what holds the head and shoulders up in a marathon or bike race; and it is the core that keep the legs moving to propel, more than the arms, the swimmer. If the core collapses it isn't long before the rest of the body gives up and the race is over.

We can have all the prudence, temperance, courage, justice we want but if we don't have perseverance it will be hard to serve homeless people, as one congregation did but gave up when a few things were stolen and a fight broke out in one of the restrooms; if we don't have perseverance it will be hard to get up in the morning, go to work and face a disgruntled colleague with kindness and compassion; and if we don't have perseverance it will be impossible to make a place like this congregation work.

I'm glad we have this text today a week before the launch of our annual giving campaign and our "Preserve the Pinnacle" capital and mission campaign.

If you look around Westminster, the signs of tenacity are everywhere. The building and campus erected by a congregation of forty members in 1854; the installation of these magnificent windows when Dr. Holmes and Dr. Butzer solicited sponsors from the 1920's to the 1960's to create a sanctuary fitting to the God we worship; in mission: over forty years of young people going to Maine to paint and build and chop wood; and most recently WEDI that started in the late 90s as a church committee and evolved over twenty years into a celebrated non-profit serving immigrant children and partnering with aspiring entrepreneurs.

Now we have not only an annual budget to raise for 2020 but major repairs to the campus starting with the roof of this building and the steeple. And, we have reached out to partners and friends on the East Side who need volunteers and dollars to work with young people and ensure neighborhood safety and security; to give a hand up with Habitat to keep people in their homes; and with WEDI, to give help to small businesses in that part of town. It will take all of the seven spiritual virtues to do these things but it will also take tenacity, prayer and the Holy Spirit.

Many of you remember Betty Ott. She died in her 90s, was a wisp of a woman physically but a tour de force of personality, faith and resolve. Betty suffered perhaps more hardship and heartbreak than most people but she was rarely discouraged and consistently hopeful, confident, and tenacious in her faith.

One of the tragedies she experienced was when her daughter died while serving as an adult chaperon to the young people on a mission trip to Maine. Barbara had a congenital heart disease and suffered a heart attack while swimming. It was a body blow to Betty, to Barbara's family and to this congregation.

But Betty was there every year after to see the youth off to Maine. She'd show up at 6am with donuts, engage everyone with her indomitable spirit and join hands to pray before the kids got into the vans to drive off. It was like Betty was saying "O death where is thy sting?" thumbing her nose at the darkness, cheering the young people on for another year of mission in the very place she lost her daughter. It's that kind of tenacity that makes a church great; keeps it going; brings hope to the world. Amen.