

Persistence and Stewardship

October 16, 2022

My dear daughter Cora is almost a year and a half old now. Her growth is wonderful and really interesting to watch, because you can see her becoming more aware of herself. She is learning that she likes cheese and rainbows, and she does not like mushrooms or baths.

Cora's language skills are developing too. She can say several words: "ma," "da," "milk," "butterfly." You know, the essentials. She can also say the word, "Yeah." As an added bonus: she can't say "no" yet, so that's a blessing.

But Cora doesn't quite grasp exactly what "yeah" means. If we ask her a question like "Do you love Mommy?" she isn't able to respond "yeah," but she'll run up to Becca and give her a hug.

Instead, she's come up with her own definition of the word "yeah." If she sees something that she wants, like cheese or a crayon, she stands with her arms lifted to heavens and says, "Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah." And if we don't give her that object, she continues, "Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah," almost hyperventilating.

And if we still refuse, then the tears start flowing. The pain and trauma we cause that child is never-ending. And she'll even continue through the tears, "Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah..."

So as a result, Becca and I now cower in the corner to eat cheese, lest we awaken the "Yeah" Monster. But if my dear wife and I are spotted and the "yeahs" begin, I have to admit, we do sometimes give in. It's hard to say no to that wholehearted, persistent cry for cheese.

And in fact, it has become a running joke in our house. If I get out a package of cookies after Cora goes to sleep, Becca will see and say, "Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah."

It's the persistence that gets you. There are just so many small battles to fight as a parent, so many requests, that you get worn down. And sometimes, if your child keeps asking and there's no harm, you give in.

So I have some empathy for this judge that Jesus talks about in his parable today. The judge is not a good man. He is really an example of the worst judge that could possibly exist. He has no respect for God or for any human being. He is unjust, as Jesus says. He refuses a widow, the epitome of the type of person that the justice system should protect.

But you know, Mr. Judge, I hear you. That persistence wears you down. The widow keeps coming and asking for a just decision. The judge eventually says, literally, "I feel like I'm being pummeled by this woman. I'll give her her way before I get a black eye."

The point Jesus is making is that if even this judge, the worst judge that every existed, doles out a good decision eventually, then imagine how God, the force for good and right, doles out justice for those who ask and persist. In a world that is full of wrongdoing and oppression of those who suffer, God will bring about justice.

When? When the Son of Man comes, Jesus says. In the end times. The question is, will people be waiting? From now until then, will you keep praying to God, and will you keep working to bring about justice in this world? Or will you throw up your hands and say, “There is no right and wrong” and do whatever you want?

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

I think persistence has been the word of the decade, the 2020s, because I feel like the past couple years have been an exercise in persistence. In all walks of our lives, we asked, “When will things return to ‘normal’?” (whatever that means to us).

In church, it was hard to not be able to gather, or to have to wear masks all the time, and to not be able to offer a lot of the ministries that we engage in.

So now, it is wonderful to be able to have reached a point of a new normal. The world and the church are not the same as they were pre-pandemic, and COVID is certainly still a part of our lives, but we are much more well-equipped to handle and treat the virus. That means that we’re better able to gather safely, and still include folks who are immunocompromised and can’t gather in person.

In thinking about all this, your Vestry and I have been discussing the purpose and the focus of St. Gabriel’s as we now emerge of the pandemic. Our mission is to “learn and do the work of Jesus,” but we discussed what that looks like.

What we found were three words that encapsulate our parish and many other churches: gather, transform, send.

First, we gather. Up to March 2020, we gathered here in this space, the sanctuary/chapel, for worship. We gathered for meals in Adams Hall. We gathered in restaurants and homes to visit. And then, we had to figure out a new way to gather that was not in-person and indoors. And thanks to your persistence (like that widow), you stuck with us as we gathered outdoors at times and virtually at times.

One of the silver linings that came out of that is the realization that gathering is sacred. There is something that nourishes our souls when we are physically together with people we care about. One of the primary purposes of the church is to gather. And now that we are in a different place as a society, we are beginning to gather again like we did before – in Adams Hall, in restaurants and homes. And we are continuing to gather virtually.

Second, when we gather, we experience transformation. That occurs most often in worship, when we celebrate Communion together or a baptism or Confirmation. Worship has been a source of transformation for centuries. But there is also transformation in community, in talking with your neighbor. There’s transformation in learning, at Sunday School or at a class about our tradition. And there’s transformation when we serve others by giving clothing or food or deodorant or just a listening ear.

So we gather, and when we gather, we experience transformation. But then finally, we are intentionally sent out. We don't come to church to pat ourselves on the back and feel good; we're equipped to be sent out to love and serve others in the world. That could be our family, our co-workers, our neighbors. It could be serving on a larger scale in our community to help strangers. We are sent out to love and serve the Lord, we say.

So we gather, we are transformed, and we are sent out. And then, eventually, we gather again, and the process continues.

That's an image for church that I think works pretty well. If you don't have that gathering, though, the cycle falls apart. And so it was only through persistence that we were able to gather during the pandemic and thus be transformed and then sent out.

I share this with you as your Vestry and I look towards the future. And what we will invite you to do is to support St. Gabriel's in this work of gathering, transforming, and sending.

I'll invite you to support St. Gabriel's financially, by donating money to help us continue our ministries. I'll also invite you to support church by sharing your time and gifts. If there are ministries that you'd be willing to help out with, we would love your help.

Every fall, we ask for your help in our stewardship campaign. The idea is that everything that we have is a gift from God. We are called to reflect on how we use these gifts from God: our money, our abilities, and our time.

It comes from a tradition dating back to the Old Testament. In those days, folks would take their first-fruits, the beginnings of their harvest, and give them to the religious leaders to distribute to folks in need. They donated the first crops they harvested as an act of giving thanks to God and to remind themselves that their harvest was only possible because of God's gift of the earth.

And we continue that tradition. We hold our stewardship campaign in the fall, the harvest-time, to continue that idea. And what I would ask is that you consider giving of your time, talent, and treasure to support St. Gabriel's in thanksgiving for what God has given you.

So you will receive a letter this week inviting you to think and pray about what you are able to give. I know that money and time seem to be in short supply these days, so give what you can. Whatever you can offer is a gift. It's because of your generosity (of money but especially of time and abilities) that St. Gabe's can do this wonderful work of gathering, transforming, and sending.

Amen.