

Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 18:1-8

The Grace of Persistence*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
The Church of the Transfiguration
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As many long-time parishioners of Transfiguration can tell you, the nickname for our parish – “The Little Church Around the Corner” – was coined by a man who refused to take no for an answer.

Joseph Jefferson was a famous 19th century actor in New York City. He was known for his portrayal of Rip Van Winkle, the character from the Washington Irving short story about a Dutch-American villager in the Catskills who falls asleep for twenty years.

A few days before Christmas in 1870, Jefferson met with the rector of the Church of the Atonement, an Episcopal parish at Madison Avenue and 28th Street. Jefferson was trying to make funeral arrangements for his friend George Holland, a celebrated comedian and actor who had died the night before.

When the rector learned that Holland had been an actor, he refused to hold the funeral in that church. He told Jefferson that he had a “distaste” for actors and did not want to be “mixed up” with such a service. The rector, however, offered to do the service privately at the comedian’s home.

Jefferson refused to settle for second-class treatment for his friend. He asked if there were any other churches nearby that would hold the funeral. The rector said condescendingly, “I believe there is a little church around the corner where they do that sort of thing.” Jefferson replied: “If that be so, sir – God bless the Little Church Around the Corner!”

So Jefferson walked around the corner and met with our first rector, Fr. George Hendric Houghton. When Jefferson mentioned nervously that his friend had been an actor, Fr. Houghton looked at him and replied: “I only know that your friend is dead and my services are asked.” The rest was history.

It’s fitting that today’s Gospel reading from Luke is about a persistent widow who also refused to take no for an answer. The widow approaches an unjust judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. She asks him over and over again to grant justice against an opponent of hers. Although the judge initially says no, he eventually

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gives in. The judge says to himself, “I will grant [the widow] justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

Jesus tells us this parable to encourage us to pray and to never to lose heart when the going gets tough. The Greek word for “losing heart” is *engkakeo*, which literally means “to fall into evil.” The phrase refers to the feelings of despair that all of us have experienced at times: becoming tired, becoming discouraged, growing weary, losing one’s motivation, and perhaps even giving up.

Ironically, prayer is often the hardest thing to do when we need it the most. It’s easy to pray and to give thanks when everything is going wonderfully. It’s a lot more challenging, however, to keep on praying when we are faced with rejection or seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Fr. Houghton, our founder and first rector, knew something about persistence. Barely two years out of seminary, he founded our parish at the age of 28 with just six parishioners. The church’s first service was held on a rainy October morning 168 years ago in the back room of a home near Lexington Avenue and 24th Street.

At first, the parish was so poor that Fr. Houghton had to literally sleep inside the church because there was no rectory. He also taught Hebrew at General Seminary to make ends meet. Fortunately, he did not lose heart. Over the course of the next 49 years, he built up the Church of the Transfiguration from what was an empty field off Fifth Avenue into one of the leading Anglo-Catholic parishes in the Episcopal Church.

Today we celebrate the rededication of the South Wall and its beautiful stained glass windows. One of these windows is the Joseph Jefferson window, which commemorates the story of Jefferson and the funeral of his friend George Holland. The window is right over there, at the corner where the wall turns. It shows Jesus greeting Jefferson and Holland at our parish lych-gate! It also shows little vignettes of Jefferson playing the role of Rip Van Winkle.

An interesting bit of trivia: The window was commissioned by the Episcopal Actors’ Guild and constructed in England in the mid-1920s. The window was so unusual and such a fine example of stained glass, that it was exhibited in London and was even seen by King George V and Queen Mary. Also, the parish received some 600 letters of complaint about the images of Rip Van Winkle drinking from a beer stein. It was the Prohibition era, after all!

The restoration of the South Wall and its windows would not have been possible without the vision and persistence of our last rector, Bishop Andrew St. John, and all of our parishioners and friends who contributed to the South Wall Campaign. The restoration not only safeguards the physical building of the church, but it also helps to enrich our spiritual well-being for years to come.

There is a wonderful prayer for the dedication of stained glass windows in the Book of Occasional Services. It reads: “O Lord God, the whole world is filled with the radiance of your glory. . . . Grant that as the light shines through [these windows] in many colors, so our lives may show forth the beauty of your manifold gifts of grace.”

As today’s Gospel reminds us, the virtue of persistence is one of these “manifold gifts of grace” that shines through from God. As we proceed with the search for our eighth rector and discern the future of the parish, we will need God’s grace to help us with all of the challenges that lie ahead.

There will be other walls that need repairing, like the one to the right of us that connects the nave to Houghton Chapel. There will be other expenses that need to be paid, notwithstanding the high cost of living in New York City. And there will be the challenge of welcoming new parishioners in the face of rising secularism and a shrinking Episcopal Church. We simply cannot afford to rest on our laurels and to rely on the accomplishments of the past.

As Jesus teaches us in today’s Gospel, we must remember to pray always and to never lose heart. If an unjust judge will give into a persistent widow, how much more will God grant justice to those who cry out day and night?

May the grace of persistence continue to shine into our parish, just as the light shines so beautifully through our stained glass windows. May we never lose heart when faced with the challenges in the coming days, months, and years. And may we continue to welcome every single person who walks through the lych-gate and enters the walls of the “Little Church Around the Corner” for at least another 168 years to come.