

“Persistent Prayers”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 16, 2022 – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

[Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8](#)

When I was a kid, my family came into the possession of a full-sized video game from a video arcade that was going out of business. While Atari consoles were the hot gaming system in those days, and most of my friends had one, we had something even cooler: Zaxxon, a game in which you control a spaceship as it flies into the lair of the evil robot Zaxxon, zapping with your laser cannon Zaxxon’s spaceships, missiles, radar dishes, and ultimately the robot itself. Once you’ve done all that, having not already lost all three of your own spaceships and ended your game, you move on to level two, where you do the whole thing over again, but against harder-to-hit missiles and spaceships and an angrier and more elusive Zaxxon robot. You also get rewarded by a little flag being placed on the screen next to your score, like a badge of honor, to show off your great accomplishment to anyone who may be watching over your shoulder.

With the game sitting in our basement and ready to play at any time, I got a lot of practice at blowing up Zaxxon the robot. And over the years, I developed enough Zaxxon playing skill that my three-spaceship-long game could last quite some time as I zoomed through the games’ repeating levels, each time earning another flag to show off the grand achievement to the world, which was usually no one but the lonely player. I progressed in my playing skills to the point that I witnessed the flags changing to medals, as they do once you hit level five, and I could regularly earn at least a five-medal award over the course of a game.

One day, after reading the technical manual that came with the game, I learned that there is a switch inside of it that you can toggle for it to go into unlimited lives mode, where the player is no longer limited to having just three spaceships to use to battle against Zaxxon and its minions. Out of curiosity or boredom or having way too much time on my hands, one day I decided to see how many times I could blow up Zaxxon, gaining flags and medals as the levels increased higher and higher. I can tell you that the medals get bigger and cooler when you hit level ten, 15, and 20, and that when you hit level 25, instead of a medal, you get a word of congratulations and encouragement from the designers of the game

in the form of a big badge that states, “Never Give Up!” I can also tell you, having followed this advice and not giving up when reaching level 25, that at level 50 the badge changes again, this time stating, “Give Up!”, which is, in this context, is very wise counsel that I *should* have heeded.

But I do like that, before being wisely instructed by the designers to use your time to do something more productive and valuable, they encourage you for a long while to “Never Give Up!” This is easier when you’re winning, earning flags and medals, and you have infinite spaceships. But never giving up is much harder when life isn’t easy, doesn’t offer you limitless opportunities to succeed, and doesn’t award you flags, ribbons, or shiny medals for your achievements. Sometimes, especially when life beats us up or beats us down, we feel like giving up is a better option than continuing on; sometimes people feel like it’s the only option.

The good words of today’s scriptures lessons from Jeremiah and Luke were offered to people who were themselves experiencing hardships, and I imagine were not at all feeling encouraged to carry on and never give up. Those who received Jeremiah’s words were experiencing terrible difficulty while living as exiles in Babylon, having been taken away from their own land in Judah after it was overrun and ruined and its cities destroyed by the invading armies of the Babylonian Empire. It was while the descendants of Jacob were a conquered and oppressed people living in a foreign land that Jeremiah told them to never give up in having hope that they would be restored and that their practice of worship would someday be even better than they had ever known, as they would not just hear the words of God as they were recited from a scroll, but they would know and live these words as they would be written upon each person’s heart; the words would come alive as people lived them out, enacting God’s vision of people living together in a just and loving world.

Our second reading from Luke was also offered to people who likely felt like giving up. Jesus offered this parable and all of his lessons to people who were living under the unjust, oppressive, and violent rule of Rome, having been invaded and conquered by Rome about 70 years before then. And the author of the gospel that we call Luke was writing a generation or two later to followers of Jesus living in the empire who were experiencing the discouraging weight of being

unwelcomed and unwanted as they were by then considered to be a dangerous religious cult, refusing to worship -- and so appease -- the imperial gods of Rome and the local gods of the people where they lived. It did not at all look like our ancient spiritual ancestors were winning anything as they were vilified and reviled, but they were given words to encourage them, in spite of all their difficulties, to never give up in the form of a parable about a persistent widow and an unjust judge.

They were to be like the widow, a marginalized and voiceless person in her world, who did the unexpected in refusing to just take the injustice she was experiencing and accepting with it without complaint. Rather, she complained (a lot!), finally wearing down an empowered judge who enacted justice, surprisingly not because he cared about her or doing what was right or good, but just so that she would shut up and leave him alone. Through the parable, we are taught that if a wicked judge, who cares not about people or justice, will make things right due to the persistent pleadings of a person in need, how much more will God, who *does* care about people and justice, make things right for those in need who call out to God. And so we are called to never give up, but to persist in calling out to God in prayer, persist in trusting that God will someday make things right, and persist in working to see justice enacted in our time.

This is hard work in a world in which too many of us embrace so much that is evil and unjust. But we are called to persist in hoping and doing the hard work of resisting against injustice of every kind, such as the unjust efforts of too many people in our own nation who seek to limit or remove the rights of others in order to preserve or grow their own influence, power, or wealth. We must persist in pushing back against efforts to decrease the rights and agency of women, LGBTQ people, and religious and racial minorities.

We must never give up in this work. And we can persist because God persists in loving us. God persists in forgiving us. God persists in speaking to us. God persists in empowering us. God persists in writing the law "love thy neighbor as thyself" upon our hearts and in trusting us to live our calling to love one another. God has not given up on us. Let us not give up on doing the work of making a better, more loving and just world for little Isabella to live in, a world where all people recognize the dignity of other people, where the nations of the world no

longer cause their neighbors to suffer by invading and claiming their land, unleashing war's terrors of destruction and death.

Let us never give up hope in believing that God has a vision of a better, more just and loving world for us and our children, and let us always persist in trusting that God is at work through us to create this world. May God's realm come soon, that God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. May this be our persistent and living prayer. Amen.