

“Knowing When to Hold E’m”

II Timothy 3:10-4:2; Luke 18:1-8

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 29, 2014 – 4th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

All of us have had times where we’ve been unsuccessful in some effort or failed to get something we very much wanted: a job, a house, a certain car, or simply recognition for an effort well done. It’s one of the most common human experiences, but that doesn’t make it any easier to accept. No matter what rationale we might try to apply to it, there’s always a feeling of disappointment.

Some years back I was involved in discussions with one of the largest churches in the area. At the time this seemed like a perfect call. They were serious, too, and I had a total of six interviews with them, only to lose out at the last stage to another candidate. Would my life and career have been better if I would received that call? All I know in retrospect is that it would have been different. It could have been the wrong match, but yet my natural disappointment was hard to take at the time. Have you ever had a similar let-down?

The author Jules Verne knew his share of frustration, too, as he began his writing. When he was 25 and had just completed his first novel, he went with the manuscript under his arm and knocked at the door of fourteen publishers. All of them rejected his novel without even the slightest encouragement.

He determined to try once more and, though fearing the worst, this time an editor recognized Verne’s unique gift. The young writer was vindicated at last because one printing house could see what he had to offer the world. They bought the book and a new career was launched. Without that initial success we might never have had such stories as *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

Jules Verne isn’t the only one who could have given up short of his goal. There’s also those who persevered in challenges to the spirit. Abraham prevailed over unknown dangers in a foreign land. Paul prevailed over forces that would have denied life to the early Church. Luther prevailed over misdirection and corruption in the institutional faith of the 16th century. Mother Teresa prevailed over poverty and disease to bring dignity and hope to the poor of Calcutta.

It’s easy to give up. It’s easy to pack it in. It’s natural to say, “Enough is enough.” It takes no fortitude to stop. We’ve all been there. We know what it’s like.

In the pastoral letter we refer to as II Timothy, Paul writes to a younger co-worker. He corresponds to bolster him in his ministry and offers him advice out of his own experience. Paul knows there will be resistance to the teaching of the Gospel both within and outside the movement, and so he confronts this head-on.

Perhaps this is why he starts out his letter by imploring, “I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands: for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.”

Paul reminds Timothy of something that is already evident: not everyone will wish him well. Some of the greatest resistance will likely come from those who appear to be the most pious. Therefore, he must be cautious to recognize those who really work against Christ and see them for what they are. Paul says to avoid “stupid and senseless controversies.” Instead, “be kindly toward everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness.” He tells the younger man to learn from the example he has tried to provide for him.

Persistence and patience are two hallmarks of service offered to the Lord. Things are not going to fall in place overnight, nor will all people be receptive to what Timothy is going to say. Yet, he should be willing to stand firm because he is on the side of God. Paul says don't give up when resistance begins, but use this as an opportunity to recommit yourself to work all the harder. Let God work through your person.

Lots of times in life we're simply ready to throw in the towel, to give up on something we recognize as important. Here we might want to recall this passage from Paul and also consider what our other text for the morning has to say.

This is a parable of Jesus. It's the story of a widow who takes her case before a judge. Since it is a single magistrate and not a tribunal, it's probably a money matter of some kind. We're given to believe that this particular judge is corrupt for it says, “he neither feared God nor had respect for people.”

Now the problem for the woman is that she is too poor to offer a bribe, so she has only one tactic at her disposal and that is her persistence. The story tells us that she keeps coming before this judge asking for justice and for what she is due. The woman comes again and again, but each time the judge refuses to hear her petition. He tells her “no” in every way he can, but she reappears before him day after day and pleads her case.

Jesus says that at first it is easy for the judge to dismiss the widow, but after a while she starts to become a nuisance. He gets tired of seeing her in front of him. He wishes she would just accept his decision and go away, because she is not going to change his mind. Of course, she could also offer him a cash incentive like most others do and maybe, just maybe, he might render a different verdict.

One day he looks up and he notices that the woman is there yet again. While he is not surprised, the judge is now utterly tired of seeing her. By this time he knows the words of her story by heart. He could recite the litany for her, and she could save her energy and stay home. The judge is aggravated because the woman knows full well how the game is played, but she refuses to do her part.

This particular day his resistance is totally worn down. He says to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out.” So, in the end, the judge ends up giving her what's due simply to be rid of her.

Jesus makes the point in this parable that even an uncaring judge may eventually hear the plea of one who calls upon him enough. If this is the case in human experience, then how much more certain is it that a loving God will hear the needs of people and respond? If even

a corrupt judge can be moved to take appropriate action in time, how much more likely will a just and merciful God listen to sincere prayers lifted to heaven?

What wins the day for the woman is her persistence. Jesus says prayer is like that. We must be willing to be patient when we bring a concern before the Lord. Perhaps this tests our sincerity and our true desire. Though God may seem slow to act, this parable assures us that all prayers will be heard. Of course, we also must face the possibility that our prayer may not be answered in the way we might ask. Though it may seem inexplicable to us, still even here God responds. Pray, Jesus says, for the Lord will hear you.

Now a third text might also be appropriate for today, but you won't find it in the Bible. It's from a country and western song by Kenny Rogers called, "The Gambler."

A person who makes his livelihood at the gaming table soon learns the importance of knowing when to "hold 'em" and when to "fold 'em." This insight is similar to ones from Paul and Jesus about persistence and patience, but to that it adds the need for discernment.

The successful card player learns when it's time to continue his pursuit or abandon it, to be willing to quit as well as to play. You have to be ready to acknowledge when there is nothing further to be gained. There is a right point for folding at cards and, in prayer, there may come a time to cease chasing an answer that is not forthcoming or not to our liking.

A faith-centered life must be both persistent and patient but, as we're also reminded today, we must always be willing to put the future, the days to come, in God's sure hands.