

Relentless Faith

Genesis 32: 22-31 Luke 18: 1-8

A couple of weeks ago, the PBS radio show, [*This American Life*, told a BBC reported story that followed the travails of someone who seeking a visa to the United States](#). Something like 8 million people from around the world each year seek a visa to the US, however only 100,000 will be randomly picked from a blind lottery. Around the world in computer cafes, applicants will check to see if they have been one of the lucky winners.

In one such computer café in Nairobi, Kenya, a Somali refugee awaited his turn at the computer. He had seen the disappointment of all of the others as they checked their status only to learn that they had been denied. He finally got to check his status, and he was accepted. He was incredulous. The throng in the computer café lifted him in his chair and paraded him around in congratulation on his good fortune. He eventually got them to put him back down. He returned to the computer and checked his status again; that's how incredulous he was. Again it said, "Accepted." He checked it again and again, in disbelief that he had won one of the rare and precious visas to the United States.

However, the process had only just begun. He needed to meet with the visa officer at the American Embassy to have his interview and present his documentation. He had to provide identification papers, a criminal background check, a transcript of his education, and a complete health record as well as complete the other required documentation. Any fault or flaw in the completed application or its supporting documents would doom the entire endeavor. One error ends the process with rejection. While only 100,000 can win the visa lottery, less than 50,000 will actually complete the visa process and gain the visa.

Abdi was a refugee from Somalia, who among his options for dealing with the terror civil war in Somalia included boarding a rickety, overcrowded boat for a trek from Somalia to Yemen on the Indian Ocean. It was very dangerous; Abdi had had several friends perish trying that route. Another option was to join the Al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia, Al-Shabaab, which has been a main protagonist in that failed country's unending civil war. The other option was to seek refuge in neighboring Kenya.

Abdi was a legal immigrant in Kenya and had his papers. However, when Al-Shabaab took credit for a vicious terrorist attack on the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, all Somali refugees in Kenya came under persecution. The neighborhood where Abdi lived in Nairobi was known as "Little Somalia," a prime target in the round-up. People were taken by the hundreds to concentration camps. Caught once with his friends, his legal papers meant nothing. It was fortunate that between them, they were able to scrape up enough money to bribe the police, a common way of dealing with Kenyan police. Abdi, and his brother with whom he shared a tiny apartment, realized that it was no longer safe to go out for anything and they hunkered down in the apartment.

With the weeks counting down to his interview with the American embassy, he did what he could to get his paperwork lined up. But at the police station, the desk officer refused to help process his request for a criminal background check. The officer would tell him it would take months. Abdi didn't have months; he had weeks. Despite the danger to himself of being rounded up, Abdi would go to the police station several times a week. But the weeks were running out. His persistence would pay off. With just two weeks left, Abdi got the background check completed.

There would be more drama with Abdi's case; I don't have time to give the details. Clearly, his relentless pursuit of his goal, of his vision, of his opportunity, gave him the chance to ultimately succeed. The wide range of obstacles and distractions, and threats were inadequate to deter and defeat him. It's quite an amazing story, and I'll try to remember to provide a link to the podcast so you can listen to Abdi's story online.

Faith is more than a nice idea, more than a stance or position, more than a routine. Faith is a challenge that demands a rigorous journey in personal development and social experience in pursuit of things that don't seem like they'll ever come about, doing things that don't seem like they'll ever succeed, and pushing continuously in efforts that sometimes seem vague, pointless, and just plain crazy in many ways. Yet people of faith repeat the sequence time after time, always unsure if the impact is going to achieve what's needed, with success hardly ever being recorded, and the daunting tasks stacked up ahead like a waiting road block. And this scenario gets played out in scripture more often than we'd care to admit.

We would rather look at the heroes, the success stories, the miracles and achievements, but those are actually the rarities. Let's see how the relentless nature of faith gets played out in two accounts.

Our first scripture in Genesis tells of Jacob's wrestling match at the Jabbok River. Jacob's brother Esau is known to be a day's journey away, but he's coming with hundreds of men. You'll recall that the relationship between Jacob and Esau in their younger years was a complete and total mess, for which most would blame Jacob as the great manipulator. Now with Esau and a horde of men approaching, the situation seemed quite ominous. Jacob sent his family across the river to safety. Alone at night, perhaps in a dream, a visitor comes, a mystery opponent. We don't know how it started but there's a fight. They struggle, wrestling all night.

It was an exhausting contest. The strange visitor could not overcome Jacob to gain the upper hand. The stranger injured Jacob in what should have been a winning move. Unbowed and in pain, Jacob stubbornly and relentlessly held on as time turned to his favor.

The stranger had to leave; daybreak was coming. We don't know why, but events delivered the advantage to Jacob, having persevered over a night's laborious struggle. Jacob now demanded a blessing from his foe. Jacob's blessings earlier in his life came by conniving and deceit. Here Jacob had to work long and hard, aggressively striving toward a goal. No clever tricks or sneaky gimmicks would work. His relentless

determination and his powerful spirit earned him a new name from his opponent, a new identity and a new promise for his life in the stranger's blessing.

As the stranger mysteriously came upon Jacob, so he departs. Jacob has his blessing, but Jacob's question— "What is *your* name?" – goes unanswered as the stranger leaves and takes his name with him.

As with Jacob, God **confronts** us as much as **invites** us to join the struggle. The faithful who respond need to grow their spiritual stamina as much physical stamina. It is hard work – demanding in both physical and spiritual aspects. Jacob is left with a limp for the rest of his life, a reminder of his stubborn persistence, but also of the difficult costs to be borne for those who pursue the sacred challenge of the Kingdom of our Savior. Jacob's relentless faith strove for the sacred blessing that seemed imminent.

God is gracious, providing for our needs and showering his children with blessings. But the work of God and his Kingdom, the work that matters, that's a formidable test. Were it not, we'd have achieved God's Kingdom on earth long ago. Dogged persistence and relentless faith is key to doing the work of the Kingdom.

Jesus tells what our pew Bible calls, "The Parable of the Persistent Widow." That's a nice way of putting it. She is a cranky pain in the lower back. She is the lady who argues over the price of a tomato and will hold up the line until she gets every penny. She is the woman who is using last week's circular and demands that the store honor the expired price, and she won't give up until she gets the discount. She is the middle schooler who hasn't done any work in the first half hour of a 45 minute class, but who has asked to go to the bathroom seven times. You know this person; the relentless one who will, at any cost, work relentlessly to get what is desired regardless of whether it's deserved or not.

In the story that Jesus tells, the woman wants justice and she hasn't heard justice from the town judge. She is relentlessly badgering the man to get satisfaction and she has no inclination to stop.

Now this judge is said to be 'neither fearing God nor caring about men.' What scripture is really saying here is that, in not so many words, "he's a jerk; he's a bum." He's rather incompetent and self-centered, clueless and indifferent about the nature and quality of justice. He treasures his own opinion and takes the counsel of no one. He summarily dismissed this woman and her complaint. He's done with her, he thinks.

Not so fast. She's determined and persistent to get justice, well, on her terms anyway. We can imagine, day after day, the judge is accosted by this widow. On and on it goes until finally, the judge can't stand her relentless nagging and gives her what she wants, just to get rid of her. The thought of actually being **just** still hasn't entered his mind. No, he just wants her to go away and leave him alone. By her relentless perseverance, she prevails and gains what she sought.

Jesus contrasts this story of a widow's hard-won gains from a useless judge with the **willingness** of a loving God to provide for his faithful. Knowing the uphill struggles and difficult situations sure to confront and challenge his disciples, Jesus shares how God is willing to bless faithful efforts. For those who respond faithfully and determinedly to the work of the Lord's mission, God's blessing will surely follow, "and quickly" adds Jesus.

Jesus ends his lesson on a questioning note by asking, *But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?* God is ready to bless our dedicated efforts, but if there's no faithfulness to the Lord's ministry and mission, a commitment to persevere, a relentless dedication to attain the promised blessing, then you can't expect greater blessings to come. They're only hard-won by determined, unwavering and relentless disciples, as shown by Jacob and by the widow.

Such blessings await each one who has the faith and spirit to engage the Lord's endeavor and seek the favored blessing. But the Lord also knows that few will make that substantial commitment, building the spiritual stamina for a relentless pursuit, and discover what God has for them.

The basic work of the church is that continuous, unending struggle for higher blessings derived from our faithfulness. That's why we're together as a church, not as social gathering or a learned society or a dining club. God pulls us together to be active, energetic and vital witnesses to his way in Jesus Christ because there are blessings to be uncovered, promises seeking fulfillment, and treasures awaiting discovery by highly motivated, diligent, obedient servants of the Lord.

I believe God's blessing for us is rich, but we can become leisurely, complacent and satisfied. God is always ready to do more to advance the Kingdom of his justice and righteousness, but only for those toiling, faithfully and relentlessly, for his blessings. I hope our faithfulness to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom will never flag, and that our blessing work remains persistent to the harvest day.