

Of Persistence and Possibility
Sunday, August 4, 2024, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you O Lord, our strength, our courage and our freedom. Amen.

Twenty-two years ago this week I left St. Peter's, San Pedro where I had been serving as Associate Rector to come to All Saints – and it was one of those rare occasions where **everyone** was happy. Folks who supported the work and vision of our Claiming the Blessing initiative were thrilled for me -- and folks who didn't were thrilled I was going to be doing it somewhere else. Meanwhile, some other folks told me if I "stepped out of parish ministry" to serve as the E.D. for this fledgling advocacy collaborative I would never get back in and my career would be over ... but off I went.

And so I arrived on August 1, 2002 with my Knudsen plastic crate full of file folders to set up shop in the southeast cubicle in the "temporary trailer" (which is still there) to begin the work of convening a church wide collaboration working for the full inclusion of all God's beloved in all the church's sacraments with a commitment to the ideal that nothing short of marriage in the prayer book was good enough for Jesus or for us. And with our eye on that prize, we focused initially on blessings of same-sex unions as an achievable goal ... and the rest (as they say) is history.

Twenty-two years later, I am deeply grateful for all the work along the way -- the good bits and the not-so-good bits; the hard bits and the grand bits. For all my CTB cohort ... past and present ... and for the truly amazing gift of being part of the work and witness of All Saints Church.

Standing on the shoulders of those who began the work long before we came along, it is twenty-two years of history of work not yet completely finished but work that crossed a significant finish line in June in Louisville at the 81st General Convention when the Episcopal Church voted **nearly unanimously** (she said pausing for effect) to change the language in our Catechism regarding Holy Matrimony from "the man and the woman" to "two people" – a step we might have prayed for in 2002 but frankly weren't sure was possible in our lifetimes when we set up shop in that temporary trailer 22 years ago.

Many of you have heard me share many times from this pulpit the words of poet Arundhati Roy ... *Another world is not only possible. She is on the way.*

Notice the word possible. Not inevitable. And the fact that she's on her way – which I believe with all my heart – does not mean there are not potholes, road blocks, barriers ... indeed, powers and principalities ... standing between her "arriving at destination."

What it means is that other world that is possible ...

a world aligned with God's love, justice and compassion ...
a world that looks like the Beloved Community
we pray for every time we pray
"thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" ...
that possible world will become not just a prayer we pray but a reality we live
if and only if we are persistent in our participation
in the process of bringing it into being.

And that brings me to arguably one of my favorite stories in all of scripture – the Gospel from Luke we heard today ... often referred to as "The Parable of the Persistent Widow" – the woman who went again and again demanding justice from the judge ... finally to prevail because her persistence wore out his resistance.

As Episcopalians we are lectionary preachers – which means we don't just pick whatever text we want to preach on any given Sunday but preach the texts assigned for that Sunday in the church year. And my brothers and sisters and gender fluid siblings I have to tell you, when Melissa Hayes sent me the lessons for this Sunday I felt like I won the lectionary lottery.

For if you understand the work of a preacher as I do –
if you believe that the charge
every time we presume to get up in this pulpit
to bring a word to the church
is to pray to be able to discern
where God's story and our story connect
with the deep need and hunger of the world's story
in this given moment –
then there is no better story to reflect on this morning
in this time of global chaos;
in these days of national polarization;
in this season of congregational transition
than Luke's story of persistence.

And there are no better exemplars
of how to live that story out than
two of our own All Saints stories –
stories from two of our parish matriarchs:
Margaret and Sarah.

In the 1970's Margaret Sedenquist of blessed memory – distressed by the impact the sexist language she was hearing in church was having on her young daughter Diana -- began keeping track of gender-oriented words in the sermons and liturgy here at All Saints.

The first Sunday she found that 100 gender-oriented words were used;
97 were male oriented

and the 3 female terms used were mother, daughter and wife.

Her persistence in sending these tallies to then rector George Regas every single Sunday ... for a year ... and having meetings with him to discuss them -- led to changes in our liturgies that put All Saints in the forefront of the inclusive language movement.

Margaret was also a delegate to our Diocesan Convention, and it came to her attention that the diocesan canons of the time were made up of exclusively hierarchical male language. In 1976, Margaret took the microphone on the floor of convention to move that they be rewritten to give equal consideration to women.

The logistics of the undertaking would be massive, but Bill Rodiger, then Chair of the Commission on Canons, promised that his committee would work over the next year to have a recommended version ready for adoption at the next convention. "Does that satisfy you, Mrs. Sedenquist?" Bill asked from the podium.

"I'm not seeking satisfaction, Mr. Rodiger" Margaret famously said. "I'm seeking justice." And the canons were indeed rewritten.

Margaret saw another world that was possible – a world of gender equity in our language about God and humanity -- and her persistence helped move us closer to "arriving at destination" – even though there are still miles to go.

And then there's this story told by Sarah Tatum in the July edition of our Centennial Story series. As Sarah recounts in her interview with Steve and Clara Williams:

"One thing I did at All Saints was work on getting more images of people of color on display around the church. I wanted to have photos of the people who won Nobel Prizes, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu and Rigoberta Menchú. I was able to get those in by fussing and complaining, and with the help of Marty Coleman. We went to a staff meeting -- I think we brought them pizza, or something and made our case. It took awhile, but I was able to get pictures up and when Bishop Talton (who was then the Bishop Suffragan of Los Angeles) saw them and asked whose project that was, my daughter Liz was there and she said, "My mother's." So that was good. At least if you keep trying, people listen."

Sarah saw another world was possible – a world where the images on our walls came closer to representing the beautiful diversity of God's beloved human family in our pews -- and her persistence helped move us closer to "arriving at destination" – even though there are still miles to go.

The other world that is not only possible ...
but is on the way ...

the one of Margaret and Sarah and the unnamed widow in Luke's Gospel
has been on the way since the beginning of time

since in the beginning was the word ...
the logos ... the Christ ...
God's inexhaustible love which is the source of all being
which we as Christians follow in the person of Jesus ...
the radical rabbi from Nazareth --
the one who loved us enough to become one of us
in order to show us how to love one another:
giving us the old, old story we are called to tell and retell.

Our sister Nadia Bolz-Weber says this about that story:

*Being a people with a sacred text
is about knowing that we are a very small part of a very big story.
And having **that** big and that old of a story
gives us an important perspective.
Because when all we can see and feel and think about
is the personal and political crap that is happening right now,
it's good to remember that we are a people of an old, old story;
one that starts at the beginning of time,
brushes the skin of the present
and reaches into a promised future.
And the promise that God is not done
and we will not be left alone still holds.
This hope is not a naive hope.
Nor is it an escapist hope.
But quite the opposite.
It's the hope of people who have heard the dangerous rumor
that there is life beyond death
and there is a hope beyond suffering
and are willing to live as if the rumor was true.*

Willing to live as if the rumor was true is a brilliant summary of what it is to live as resurrection people in this beautiful and broken world ... engaged in the work Sister Joan Chittister famously described as "reclaiming the planet an inch at a time until the Garden of Eden grows green again."

That, my brothers and sisters and gender fluid siblings is the journey we are on together ... an inch at a time ...
as we journey together into God's future –
a journey that at times presents us with seemingly insurmountable challenges
but never leaves us alone to meet them ...
sometimes with solutions we couldn't even have imagined.

And so a final story ... which some of you have heard before:

It was 2010 and we were on a month-long European adventure with the most patient GPS on the planet. She never panicked. She never raised her voice. She never freaked out when the road signs suddenly changed from Italian to German and then back to Italian. She never said, "How many times do I have to tell you?" She never said, "I cannot believe you missed that turn." And she certainly never said, "No! No! the other left!" Instead, no matter how clueless or far afield we got, her patient, persistent refrain was, "Recalculating."

I think it is fair to say it took us a little while to trust her – and we can pinpoint the moment when that happened. It was as we were arriving at our hotel on Lake Como, in Italy – which is absolutely as fabulous as everyone says it is, and you can totally see why George Clooney wants to hang out there.

So we were traveling up the east side of the lake looking at the GPS which was telling us we were approaching our destination – which was on the west side of the lake and we were saying, "This can't be right. We're going to end up in the middle of the lake. Our hotel is on the other side of the lake. There's no possible way this could be right."

So we're driving along – and the tension is mounting in the rental car as we're each convinced the other has made a critical navigational error which is going to tank our vacation -- and suddenly our patient, wise, persistent GPS says ... **"In 500 meters, board the ferry."**

Who knew there was a ferry?

Well, the GPS did, and we never doubted her again.

The way the GPS guided us on our Excellent European Adventure is how I believe the Holy Spirit guides each and every one of us on our Excellent Earthly Adventures. She is patient, she is persistent. No matter how clueless we are or far afield we go, her patient, persistent refrain is, "Recalculating"-- continually calling us back in alignment with God's values of love, justice and compassion.

And what keeps us in that alignment – what keeps our spiritual GPS connected to that satellite – is community.

It is to this community we come – to this sacred space that has fed and fueled generations before us – to be reminded that we are a very small part of a very big story to remember that we are loved and called to walk in love, and to be fed and fueled to go back out into the world in witness to that love.

"Do this in remembrance of me" – we will say in just a few minutes,

as we gather around this table to share the bread and wine made holy.

“In remembrance of”

to re-member

to reverse our amnesia that we are embraced

by the indestructible power of God’s inexhaustible love

and – in response to that love –

that we are called to plug in our spiritual GPS

into those core values of love, justice and compassion

as we journey forward –

sometimes having to board the ferry we had no idea was waiting for us

engaged in the holy gospel work of persistence –

resisting the powers and principalities which would divide and distract us

and acting as agents of change and challenge to anything

absolutely anything

that stands in the way of that other world which is not only possible ...

she is on the way.

Won’t you pray with me.

Another world is not only possible. She is on the way.

Amen.