

## **To Persevere - to Sustain – to Persist**

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, February 4, 2018

### ***Opening Words***

“And Yet You Persist”

- by Gretchen Haley (For Elizabeth Warren)

Though you have been warned  
And given plenty of explanations  
Reasons to do otherwise  
You have persisted  
To claim a life of joy, and justice  
To carve out this time  
This space for the renewal  
Of your own heart  
Despite all the reasons, the resistance  
Fighting for your attention, luring you towards fear  
You persist  
To practice gratitude  
For this day, this life  
That has been given  
This chance to begin again  
And so let us gather  
That we might  
Offer one another courage, strength  
Healing, hope  
And this promise to  
Persist in kindness,  
Persevere in compassion  
And  
Prevail in a life that is for more than ourselves  
Come, let us worship together

### ***Story for All Ages***

“How Strong Am I?” - a tale by Rabbi David Wolf

A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. “Do you think if I use all of my strength, I can move this rock?” the child asked. His father answered, “If you use all of your strength, I am sure you can do it.” The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, “You were wrong. I can’t do it.” His father put his arm around the boy’s shoulder and said, “No son. You didn’t use all your strength – you didn’t ask me to help.”

## **Reading**

“Praise (after the earthquake in Haiti)” - a poem by Alison Luterman

The thin sound of singing floated up from under the building,  
which was pancaked on its cheap foundation.

Port-au-Prince. Hell's aftermath.  
Bodies laid out in rows, covered with white cloth,  
loaves of death-bread for spirits to eat.  
A hundred thousand buried overnight  
in hastily-dug ditches, because of the heat.  
And the smell! So, no one believed she was really alive,  
this girl trapped under rubble for almost two weeks,  
until a worker heard tunes issuing from twisted rebar  
and stopped, petrified in disbelief.

She was still singing when they pulled her out,  
skinny as the edge of a sickle moon.  
I watched on TV from my living room  
as Darlene Etienne, age sixteen,  
was drawn forth from her living tomb,  
caroling hymns in Creole.

How many mornings have I struggled  
to hush the voice in my brain  
saying you will never find your place in this world?  
How many years wrestled the weight of imaginary bricks  
that would pin me paralyzed to the bed? But this girl  
sang herself through the closed door of the grave  
and it opened and she rose.  
A miracle. Praise the light.  
Praise how I hear her voice deep in my own heart now,  
a thin soprano thread pulsing with longing.

## **Sermon Reflection**

It was during the first week of February last year that Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, in response to Senator Elizabeth Warren's relentless opposition to the nomination of Jeff Sessions for Attorney General, unwittingly uttered the words that became a firestorm of a meme – “Nevertheless, She Persisted.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-republicans-facebook-twitter.html>

Warren could very well have been channeling the sentiment of 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate, Wangari Maathai, who wrote:

“I was grounded in that moral fiber of wanting to do the right thing. I was so sure that this was the right thing because it was so obvious and even those who were persecuting me knew, and I knew they knew...I was doing the right thing. But they didn’t want me to do it because it was inconveniencing them, and I knew that.”

It could be said that Elizabeth Warren possesses a particular facility for perseverance – the ability to persist in her efforts, even in the face of mighty opposition. How did she come by that ability? Is it an inborn part of her being or something that has been cultivated over time through her experiences of life? While we can never know the precise combination of factors that lead to any given person’s ability to develop a strength of character, we can learn from their example and be inspired, and perhaps be drawn to our own self-reflection.

And so we begin our worship exploration this month into the question of what does it mean to be a people of perseverance?

### **Word Roots**

While the word perseverance literally comes from the Latin *per* (thoroughly) + *severus* (severe, serious), we could also turn to the word **sustain**, from the Latin roots *sub* (up from below) + *tenere* (to hold) or **persist**, *per* (thoroughly) + *sistere* (to stand). Other terms or phrases that serve as synonyms to perseverance are **stick-to-itiveness**, constancy, steadfastness, resiliency, tenacity, and **grit**.

Over the next four weeks we will be looking at what it means to be a people of perseverance – both as individuals and as a community of faith – and we will be examining it from several different angles. But for this morning’s introduction, I want to challenge what I believe may be a fairly commonly held belief about the quality of perseverance, a belief that consistently trips us up in our efforts to cultivate it in our lives. It is a belief that is deeply rooted in our culture as well - it can be found at the center of our ideology of individualism, our “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” mentality, our cultural worship of the **lone-wolf hero**. You may have already gleaned my direction with this from the choice of our story and meditation this morning...

In the introduction to this month’s small group resource packet published by the good folks at Soul Matters, they begin with the following two quotes – the first of which can be found on the cover of our order of service, the words of Shane Koyczan:

**“People cry not because they are weak. It’s because they’ve been strong too long.”**

Those words are followed by this anecdote from filmmaker/activist Michael Moore:

"This morning I have been pondering a nearly forgotten lesson I learned in high school music. Sometimes in band or choir, music requires players or singers to hold a note longer than they actually can hold a note. In those cases, we were taught to mindfully stagger when we took a breath so the sound appeared uninterrupted. Everyone got to breathe, and the music stayed strong and vibrant... So let's remember the advice of music: Take a breath. The rest of the chorus will sing. The rest of the band will play. Rejoin so others can breathe. **Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song** for a very, very long time. You don't have to do it all, **but you must add your voice to the song.**"

They go on to ask:

So, have you been strong too long?

It's not the usual question when tackling the topic of perseverance. Most often, we're asked, "Are you ready to be strong?" The standard recipe is well known: Buck up! Grin and bear it! Keep pushing! Keep moving forward! Dig deep; you are stronger than you know! But maybe Koyczan is right. Maybe this typical roadmap isn't the path to perseverance; maybe it's just the path to breakdown.

And when we combine Koyczan's quote with Moore's invitation to breath, **we suddenly see that balance plays a bigger role in perseverance than we often assume.** As a people of perseverance, we are being called not just to grit and strong wills, but to gentleness and self-care. Constantly pushing ourselves without also giving ourselves the gift of pause gets us nowhere. Digging deeper without making time to deepen and fill our wells is a recipe for self-inflicted pain.

**All of which is to say that maybe vulnerability is the real secret to perseverance.** Maybe admitting you're tired and asking for help is the real strength that gets us through. That dominant myth of Sisyphus pushing his rock up that endless hill hasn't done us any favors. We assume that Sisyphus is suffering because his work is endless, but maybe it's his isolation and lack of a place to rest that is his true torment.

In 2010, Margaret J. Wheatley published a lovely little gem of a book simply titled *Perseverance* – I highly recommend it – and she uses the following message from the **Elders of the Hopi Nation**, that was published in the year 2000 as an organizing framework for this book. This was their message then that feels particularly resonant in this day and time:

**To my fellow swimmers:**

Here is a river flowing now very fast.

It is so great and swift that there are those  
who will be afraid, who will try  
to hold on to the shore.

They are being torn apart and  
will suffer greatly.

Know that the river has its destination.

The elders say we must let go of the shore.

Push off into the middle of the river,  
and keep our heads above water.

And I say see who is there with you  
and celebrate.

At this time in history,  
we are to take nothing personally,  
least of all ourselves,  
for the moment we do,  
our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over.

Gather yourselves.

Banish the word struggle from your attitude  
and vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done  
in a sacred manner and in celebration.

For we are the ones we have been waiting for.

In closing, I wish to offer one more excerpt from Wheatley's book for our reflection this day, again a piece I found very timely for my own reflection – I hope it will speak to you as well. It is simply titled "Lost"

"When we are overwhelmed and confused, our brains barely function. We reach for the old maps, the routine responses, what worked in the past. This is a predictable response, yet also suicidal. If we keep grasping for things to look familiar, if we frantically try and fit new problems and situations into old ways of thinking, we will continue to wander lost and eventually collapse from our confusion. **There is no way to get out of this wilderness except to acknowledge that we're lost.** Recognizing our situation usually leads at first to even wilder grasping after old solutions. Yet there's nothing we can learn about this strange new world until we stop grasping, pause, calm down, and look around. The first thing we could notice is the most essential: **we're still here.** This in and of itself makes our situation workable. We don't have to panic about our situation—**we need to acknowledge it.** Yes, we're lost. But in truth we're not. We're right here. As we relax enough to tune in, we'll be able to notice the information and signals that are everywhere around us. There's sufficient information right here to help us find our way out. But we have to be willing to stop, to listen, to admit we don't know. To navigate life today, we definitely need new maps. Our old ones confuse us unendingly. These new maps are waiting for us. They'll appear as soon as we quiet down and, with other lost companions, relax into the unfamiliarity of this new place, senses open, curious rather than afraid. The maps we need are in us, **but not in only one of us.** If we read the currents and signs together, we'll find our way through."

So, friends, this month, let's not torment ourselves. We don't have to give up those pep talks about digging deep and being stronger than we know. But right alongside that, let's make sure we're also doing the more tender work of propping each other up and reminding each other to breathe.

Blessed be. Amen.

### **Sources**

Soul Matters Resource Guide <https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/>

*Perseverance* - by Margaret J. Wheatley <https://www.amazon.com/Perseverance-Margaret-J-Wheatley/dp/1605098205>