



October 21, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 18:1-8

“Never Give Up”

Most of us have probably had the childhood experience of REALLY wanting something VERY badly- something that seemed beyond the reach of possibility—and yet we allowed ourselves to dream, hope, and imagine we might someday, somehow receive this wonderful item!!

Those of us who were taught to pray by our parents probably asked GOD for the item we wanted in prayer: *Dear Lord, please may I have a pony? Or a bicycle, a bride doll, a Lionel train set.* We waited. And waited. And, for many of us, that item did not miraculously appear on our front porch.

Those of us who did not grow up in praying homes may have asked Santa Claus for the longed for item. And again, many of us woke up Christmas morning to find something else under the Christmas tree.

Life teaches us to become realistic about our dreams. Disappointments lead us to pare down what we hope for. We don't want to feel that crushing disappointment again, so voices inside us murmur, “Don't get your hopes up too high. You better give up on those dreams that can never come true.”

Then we hear the words of our Gospel lesson today: “Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them they should always pray, and never give up.”

NEVER GIVE UP. What should we do? Dream unrealistic dreams? Ask for things in prayer that we REALLY want to see happen, even though life has taught us often things don't turn out the way we wish they would?

I believe Jesus' answer is "Yes". Don't bury your dreams, hopes and longings. Bring them to God in prayer. No matter what. Bring them to God in prayer. Jesus teaches that our persistence in turning to God with our needs, struggles, concerns and longings WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE. Persistence in prayer WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE. That is God's promise.

That difference appears in one or both of two ways. Prayer can change things. And prayer can change us.

Garrison Keillor tells us story about a family living in a small town in northern Minnesota --- in his fictional yet true-to-life town of Lake Woebegone. This was a large family of seven children. One November, shortly before Thanksgiving, the father of the family was helping a neighbor with some repairs on the roof of his house. We'll call him "Ed". As Ed worked with his neighbor, his friend noticed a Goodyear blimp slowly gliding by overhead. He called Ed's attention to this novelty, which wasn't something you often see in Lake Woebegone. Ed looked up, and was blinded by the sun glinting off the silvery shape above. He shaded his eyes with his hand and took a step back, in order to get a better look. Unfortunately he didn't realize how close he'd been standing to the edge of the roof. He stepped back onto a gutter, slipped and lost his footing, then fell to the concrete patio below.

At that same moment his wife, who we'll call "Betty" was just setting a macaroni and cheese casserole on the dinner table for her brood of seven. Ed had told them to go ahead with supper; he'd be home late. The phone rang. The children could tell it was something serious immediately by the way their mother's voice became very strong on the telephone. When she hung up, she quickly put on her coat. "Your father's at the hospital," she said. "He's been badly hurt. I'll call you from the hospital when I can." Leaving the oldest girl in charge, she ran to the neighbor's house for a ride to the hospital.

It was a serious accident. Ed had surgery. Betty couldn't take care of the children, so they were farmed out to friends and relatives. As the days passed, then weeks, Betty took each of her children aside to tell them, "Your father's going to be all right. But he won't be able to work for a while. You need to be prepared. We won't be able to have much Christmas this year."

The oldest boy, John, was about ten years old. It didn't matter that his mother was warning him not to get his hopes up too high. Because his hopes were up higher than he could ever get them down again. He'd been dropping hints since September that he wanted the Lionel train set, with the livestock loader, on display in Lundgren's store window. He'd been making sure his folks knew what he

wanted and where they could buy it. He'd also been praying regularly. He made sure that GOD knew what he wanted and where it could be found. "Right there in Lundgren's window, God," he prayed. "Please, God, I pray for that Lionel train set. With the livestock loader."

His heart trembled at the thought he might not be able to get the train set after all. He kept on praying, "Please, God, I know you can do ANYTHING."

As November moved into December the news from the hospital became more encouraging. One day Betty rounded all the children up, took them home, thanked their caretakers, and smilingly told them their father would be coming home the next day. This was exactly three days before Christmas. Betty had set up a little tree, and there were wrapped gifts for each of them scattered underneath. None was big enough to be a Lionel train set. John prayed that the next couple days would give his parents time to buy it.

The next day Ed came home. He was still pretty weak, and a lot thinner, but he smiled nearly all the time. The children were relieved that he seemed "himself" after all he'd been through. The next days passed quickly. When John went to bed on Christmas even then there were no new packages under the tree. He still prayed and hoped---- it wouldn't be Christmas until he got up in the morning.

Christmas day dawned clear and cold. The children scurried from their beds to the tree, where their father was passing around gifts. John had two packages. One contained a pocketknife and wrapped homemade candies. The other, a largish box, sent John's heart leaping into his throat, but when he picked it up, he knew it wasn't the train set. Inside the box was a brand new pair of winter boots. He thanked his parents and sat watching the others as they unwrapped gifts, played and scuffled. After Christmas dinner, John decided to go outside. He pulled on his parka and his brand new winter boots. Telling his parents good-bye, he went out onto the frozen lake.

John's disappointment had not yet peaked. He'd been feeling mostly numb all day. But as he tromped along in his new boots, his disappointment welled up as hot tears in his eyes. "God, why did things have to turn out this way?" he prayed. He stomped on the ice, and let the tears come. In a bit he noticed that he was pretty far out, so he turned to head back towards home.

As he turned, John saw the lights of the town shining before him. The sun was nearly set—it was close to 4 o'clock and the days are short in northern Minnesota. As John looked at his town, he could pick out his own house, on the left, not far

from shore. The lights sparkled in the clear winter air. It looked, John realized, exactly like a town in a model train layout- so tiny, so pretty, and so lifelike.

John quickened his steps. His heart felt strangely light. The wintry air cooled his cheeks and his now dry eyes. Looking at his own home, he suddenly knew something. He knew that the best Christmas gift of all had been given to him that year: his own home and family. His father was getting well and was home from the hospital. That was Christmas, you see. Christmas was in that little house. And the reason he was drawn to the train set was that it brought alive his feelings for his home, his town, his country and world. The REALITY that he cherished was his, to savor and enjoy. He hurried home with a light step, in his brand new Christmas boots.

Persistence in prayer makes a difference. Prayer changes THINGS. And prayer changes US. Things that seemed one thing now appear as something else. And the longings in our hearts shift and change as God lives with us through our struggles.

Our Christian faith tells us one more thing about prayer. The Old Testament is filled with stories of God reaching out to his people. The people prayed—they cried out to God in their struggles. God cared deeply for his people, and sought to bring them help and healing, release from suffering and oppression. But the people still wrestled, even crying out, “Do you KNOW, Lord, how much we are suffering? Do you CARE?? Are you even THERE???” And then something miraculous, far beyond our understanding happened.

God came to us. God came to be with us in the flesh. God came to be one of us in Jesus of Nazareth. God came in Christ to bear our burdens, suffer what we suffer, and set us free from sin and death.

Jesus tells us, “Never give up!” When our hearts are longing, tell God about it. As we persist in prayer, things in our lives WILL be changed. As we persist in prayer, we ourselves WILL be changed. As we persist in prayer, the God who enters our lives as ONE OF US WILL come to us. So may this be. Amen!

(Invite people to write a prayer of their hearts- perhaps something that doesn't even seem possible, on a corner of the bulletin. Suggest they take it home, place it in their Bible to soak in God's presence.)