''Blessed Persistence'' A sermon based on Genesis 18:20-32 and Luke 11:1-13 delivered on Sunday, July 27, 2025 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

And Jesus said to them, ''Suppose one of you has a friend and you go to him at midnight and say

to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set

before him.'... I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is a friend,

at least because of his persistence, he will get up and give him whatever he needs." And in Genesis,

when Abraham brokers with God for the fate of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, we can see that he

was VERY persistent. It is almost comical the way Abraham barters with God to save the lives of the

people of those fated towns. At each step of the bargaining process, Abraham says things like "Let me

take it upon myself to speak to the Lord," and "'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more

. . ."

Persistence, Jesus says, is what makes the difference, not friendship. Persistence, God shows in his dealings with Abraham, can make a difference between life and death. It is in the Gospel lesson, too, that we see another example of Jesus turning things upside down for us: Jesus making meaning out of words and ideas that we see differently.

Persistence has never really seemed like a virtue to me. I think of nagging. I think of beating my head against the wall, of the squeaky wheel, of someone who just continues to badger someone else. None of these descriptions seem like something that Jesus should be holding up as a positive trait. And, yet, clearly he did, as did God in his bartering with Abraham.

Persistence, blessed persistence, is a hard concept for us to grasp, but it is an important concept,

for nothing in this world is guaranteed, and the only way that some things get accomplished is through

persistence. I had a personal experience which brought this home to me many years ago. When I

decided that it was time to return to seminary, one of the things that I had to do was to ask former

professors, colleagues and friends to write references for me as part of my application process to

Andover-Newton. One of my friends. Rick Floyd, who was also a colleague, wrote one of the references

for me and then sent me a copy. As I read the copy of the reference, I found myself getting angry, for

toward the end of the reference form. Rick had written "Alison is persistent" Given my negative views of

this quality of character, as I have already shared, I bristled that Rick would describe me this way. I had

visions of myself as a nagging "fishwife," or worse, and I did not really understand why my friend had

written that about me. All I could see in that phrase is that I was somehow a nag, an annoying person

who would not give up and go away. But, as time went on, and I had to doggedly put one foot in front of

the other in order to slog through the classes, and the papers, and the traffic commuting to school from

Maine. As I had to push my way through all that heavy reading, and writing paper after paper, before I

could graduate, I realized that what Rick had written was truly a compliment. What he was saying, I

believe now, is that I would persist until I reached my goal. He was not saying that I was somehow an

annoying person, but that indeed I would not give up until I accomplished what God had called me to do.

I was persistent, yes, but it was a blessing, not a curse. It was persistence, blessed persistence.

In his book. One Minute Wisdom (p. 116), Jesuit author, Anthony de Mello, describes what it is

like from the other side of the coin. We see that we need to be persistent because we are made in the

image of God, and God, above all else, models blessed persistence. In his book de Mello relates the

following concept:

It is said that God up in heaven holds each one of us by a string. When we sin, we are in essence cutting the string; the connection between ourselves and God, ourselves and what we know, ourselves and others. When we cut the string and realize what we have done, we ask for God's help or forgiveness, and she ties the string again, making a knot- thereby bringing us closer. Again and again we cut the string— and again and again our Creator reties it, With each knot our strings become shorter and shorter, and we draw closer and closer to God.

God's blessed persistence in forgiving us allows us to draw nearer and nearer to the divine source of all being, and in our blessed persistence in asking for forgiveness, we also model faithfulness.

On July 2nd 1776, the day after the Continental Congress voted that our country would be

independent from Britain, statesman, John Adams wrote a letter home to his wife, Abigail. The letter is

described by the editor of Yankee Magazine (July, 1995), in which it was reprinted, as "both triumphant

and troubled." In it, John Adams speaks of his apprehensions about the move to independence, and then

summarizes the persistence of the colonists that led to this action (actions spanning some 15 years from

1761-1776). He concludes by saying:

. . . the new Governments we are assuming, in every Part, will require a Purification from our Vices and an Augmentation of our Virtues or they will be no Blessings. The People will have unbounded Power. And the People are extreamly (sic) addicted to Corruption and Venality, as well as the Great I am not without Apprehensions from this Quarter. But I must submit all my Hopes and Fears to an over- ruling Providence, in which, unfashionable as the Faith may be, I firmly believe, (p. 136)

I bring this letter to your attention, not so much because of what it says about the persistence of

the American colonists which lead to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, although that also

illustrates my point, but I bring it to your attention because of that one last subtle turn of a phrase, which

is so small, but pregnant with meaning. At the end of the letter, John Adams writes, ''But I must submit

all my Hopes and Fears to an overruling Providence, in which, *unfashionable as the Faith may be*, I firmly believe." (italics mine) Do you hear what I heard in this passage? Faith in God, "an overruling

Providence," as Adams puts it, which we see as the backbone of our American historical heritage, was

"unfashionable" in John Adams' day! This is not what we have as our historic sense of that time. We

think of those "good old days" as a halcyon time for the Faith, when everyone believed and went to

church. But there it is, in black and white, boldly stated by someone who would have been in a position

to know, that Faith in God was of all things, at that point in history, considered "unfashionable!"

How then, we may well ask, has such a Faith survived? How has Christianity survived for well over 2000 years, when we can plainly see its future had never been guaranteed—when as recent as 249 years ago, the Faith was not commonly held or practiced? How has the Faith survived? The only way it could, through persistence, blessed persistence. It has survived through the persistent faith, against all odds, of the likes of John and Abigail Adams, of Abraham Lincoln, the Apostle Paul, the Christians of the church in Colossae to which today’s Epistle lesson was written, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Anne Hutchinson, Rosa Parks, Mother Theresa, Oscar Romero, and you and me. John Adams and all of these people mentioned, are like that one righteous person in ten in Sodom and Gomorrah for which God will spare those ancient cities at Abraham's behest. The church has not survived because it is an institution. It has survived because of the faith, the blessed persistent faith and righteousness, of thousands of saints and sinners over the years.

And how do we keep that blessed persistence against all odds alive today? How do we insure the

survival of the Faith into the future? The following quote, anonymous at the time, but since revealed to have been written by Kent M. Keith, as a 19 year old Harvard student and reprised in his book The Silent Revolution entitled “The Paradoxical Commandments,” was given to the United Methodist Bishop Muzorewa of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) many years ago, and also hung on Mother Theresa’s Children’s Home wall in Calcutta (which it is why it is often attributed to her\*\*) may give us a clue to the answer:

*People are unreasonable^ illogical and self-centered. Love them anyway If you do “good” people will accuse you of selfish and ulterior motives. Do good anyway If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway, Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway The biggest men with the biggest ideas can be shot down by The smallest men with the smallest minds. Think big anyway. People favor “underdogs” but follow only top dogs. Fight for some underdog anyway. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight, Build anyway. People really need help but may attack you if you help them. Help people anyway. Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.*

John Adams might have said it this way: It may be unfashionable to believe in an overruling Providence, people may ridicule you for your faith and belief in God. Believe anyway. Amen.

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**\*\*Did Mother Teresa write “the Paradoxical Commandments”?**

Here is an analysis of Kent M. Keith’s poem The Paradoxical Commandments. This is a wildly popular poem that has enraptured many readers, including Mother Teresa, who was said to have had a variation of this poem hanging in her children’s home in Calcutta. In fact, ***because of this connection, this poem is often wrongly attributed to Mother Teresa.***

### *This selection, entitled, "The Paradoxical Commandments", was written by Kent M. Keith in 1968 when he was a 19 year old Harvard Student. Since then, it has been quoted by millions and even mistakenly attributed to Mother Teresa who had a version hung as a poem on a wall in her Children's Home in Calcutta. The text contains 10 commandments. The theme and the paradox is to persevere in doing good for humanity and acting with integrity even if your efforts aren't appreciated.*