

August 9, 2020

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Perseverance (8th in a Series of Ten Sermons)

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“They’ve kicked me around ever since I was young, but they never could keep me down. Their plowmen plowed long furrows up and down my back; But God wouldn’t put up with it. He sticks with us.” (Eugene Peterson translation of Psalm 129: 1-2)

Dear Friends in Christ,

In previous weeks we have focused on 1) pilgrimage, 2) repentance, 3) providence, 4) worship, 5) service, 6) joy, and 7) work. Today we explore what it means to persevere in terms of believing in Christ and practicing this long obedience in the same direction.

We find perseverance language in our Baptism liturgy, where Godparents and parents and congregations promise to assist the baptized *“to spend your days renouncing the devil and all of his ways and all his works.”*

We find perseverance questions in the Rite of Confirmation, *“Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?”*

We find perseverance language in the marriage vow - *“to have and to hold (Christ) from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”*

Eugene Peterson likes to talk about perseverance in terms of “stick-to-itiveness.” By definition, it seems to me, children are not famous for stick-to-itiveness. It’s one of those virtues that develops over a period of times as a result of going through the ups and downs of life and learning by trial and error. I can remember as a boy being very excited about collecting baseball cards and wanting to have the best possible baseball card collection, but I really didn’t stick with it. My first dream in life was to be a homerun hitter for the Minnesota Twins, just like Harmon Killebrew, but after a couple of years of Little League and into the Babe Ruth level, I lost interest. I quit in midseason. As an adult, I remember us buying a keyboard and I decided I wanted to be a great piano player, but after a couple of lessons from my bride Debi, I said to her, never mind. I can’t tell you how often I’ve tried to lose weight and embark on a special plan to be physically fit - you can just take a look at me busting at the seams to know that in so many ways, I fail the test of stick-to-itiveness. My hunch is that you could all tell similar stories of your good intentions going awry.

Of course in terms of believing in Jesus Christ and sticking with our Baptism and Confirmation and marriage vows, we are talking about that which matters far more than losing weight or learning how to play piano well. Mark records Jesus declaring in the

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moments before ascending into heaven, *“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever believeth not will be condemned.*

Three truths we learn on the subject of persevering in the one true faith until the end:

Truth #1 is that our perseverance is sustained by God’s faithfulness.

Truth #2 is that perseverance means that we keep on going, trusting that God will sort it all out at the final harvest.

Truth #3 is that perseverance has eternal purpose.

Truth #1 is that our perseverance is sustained by God’s faithfulness.

In Psalm 129, the image is of the nation of Israel lying face down and their oppressors ploughing furrows back and forth up and down their back. The enemies of Israel had been kicking them around ever since they were a young nation, but the people of God would not quit. For long centuries Satan and his demons have waged war against the Christian faith, and yet there are more adherents to Christianity than any other religion. The sinful world has tried persecution and ridicule, it has tried torture and exile, it has thrown everything but the kitchen sink against God’s people, and yet 2.4 billion people, or 29% of the world population profess Jesus as Savior.

But God wouldn’t put up with it, he sticks with us. Our human stories of staying faithful to God begin with Him being faithful to us. In verse 4 of our text, God sees to it that the harnesses of the evil ploughmen are ripped to shreds. In Israel’s case, God saw to it that 70 years of Babylonian exile ended. God saw to it that heathen kings made it possible for them to return to their homeland, to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls and their beloved temple. Fast forward 600 years, and in a remote village called Nazareth, God saw to it that His Son was conceived by the Holy Ghost. In a little town of Bethlehem, God saw to it that unto us a child was born of the virgin Mary.

On the regions of Judah and Galilee and on a little hill outside of Jerusalem, God was faithful. He saw to it that Jesus was despised and rejected by men, He saw to it that His beloved Son was a man of sorrows and that he was acquainted with grief. He saw to it that Jesus was despised and pierced and crushed and slapped and wounded and beaten and crucified until that moment when He could breathe no longer, He prayed that His Father would forgive all enemies, He commended His spirit into His Father’s hands, He was cut off the land of the living. Most importantly, on the third day, God saw to it that His Son was raised up from the grave, and as a result, no matter how dark and no matter how dreary and no matter how discouraging our days get, at the end of the day, we rest in God’s faithfulness.

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The kingdom of God is like a single mom who doesn't know how much more she can take. Her finances are a disaster, her air conditioning is broken, her car needs expensive repair, her children are naughty, the school year looks to be a nightmare, she wonders if anyone cares, and yet at the end of the day, she goes to sleep believing that God is with her, believing her sins have been paid for, believing that her name is written in the book of life, telling herself one more time that she must keep going. Which brings us to Truth #2.

Truth #2 is that perseverance means that we keep on going, trusting that God will sort it all out at the final harvest.

In our text for today, the Psalmist rejoiced that the Lord was righteous and that in the end all who hated the Church would be put to shame. He compared his enemies to grass that grew in shallow ground. Palestine was a rocky country, and in many places there was only a thin layer of soil over bedrock. Seeds would sprout and grow from this dirt, but the grass didn't last. The thin soil couldn't support it. By midday the grass would wither. No reapers would be wasting their time there. No one going along the would ever look over and say, "hey that's a great harvest, the Lord is really blessing you!" This illustration is a cartoon, meant to bring a smile to our lips today. The people of God keep going, knowing that in the end, God will have it all sorted out.

In these days of the virus, we find the authorities restricting Christians from assembling together, and yet through social media, it seems as though the Gospel of Christ might be reaching more people than ever. In some states like California, we find governors discouraging and even forbidding Christians from singing praises to their God, and yet by God's grace, we keep going, knowing that God will be working everything out for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purposes.

In II Corinthians, Paul had every reason to give up and go home. He couldn't even count the number of times he had been beaten. He had been beaten the regulation 39 stripes by the Jews five times. The Romans believed that 40 lashes (Scourges) was the maximum number of lashes required to kill a person. If the governor or the commander permits for the 40th lash and the soldier was unable to kill the person then that soldier is to be put to death, so one could imagine how much force was behind every lash. The soldier's very life depended on it.

Paul wrote to the Romans that we rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Imagine the kind of character produced inside of Paul as he suffered shipwreck, as he persevered through danger from the rivers, from bandits, and from his own countrymen, from pagans. Imagine

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his character produced as he persevered through danger in city streets, danger in the desert, danger on the high seas, danger among fake Christians. Imagine the character produced in him as he stuck with it through drudgery, exhaustion, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, fasting, cold, and exposure.

None of that was able to push Paul off his path. None of it convinced him that he had chosen the wrong career. None of that persuaded him to give it up or quit and take his toys and go home. He kept on going and pressing forward towards the prize that awaited at the end of the race.

The kingdom of God is like a couple whose marriage ended after years of conflict, harsh words, disappointment, and unfaithfulness. The divorce was bitter, the court sessions were costly, the children were scarred, it seemed to the casual observer that it was a lose/lose/lose situation. And yet as time went on, the God of new beginnings and second chances got the final word. All concerned kept on listening to the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Their Good Shepherd kept on following them around with goodness and mercy. All concerned not only survived their days of trouble, they came out stronger on the other side. They kept on going, knowing that at the end of time, God would sort it all out, knowing God's ways and thoughts and purposes were higher than their ways and thoughts and purposes. Which brings us to truth #3

Truth #3 is that perseverance has eternal purpose.

One of the very real dangers of adversity is that the devil would tempt us into bitterness and worse. In our text for today, the Psalmist went from seething anger to a spirit of vindictiveness. He writes, **"Oh, let all who hate Zion grovel in humiliation."** The Psalmist is seething in anger. His sense of Israel being wronged has been festering. Even though God had commanded Israel never to hate their brothers in their hearts, even though God had insisted that they not take vengeance or bear grudges, the Psalmist did exactly that. He forgot what we want never to forget, that the #1 desire of God in heaven above is to have mercy on sinners.

So also had the Pharisees fallen in the trap of loving those who were easy to love but hating their enemies. Jesus looked them in the eyes and scolded, "if you love those who love you in return, what's the big deal? Even the tax collectors and the prostitutes can do that. Our assignment as Christians whose hearts are set on pilgrimage is to be kind to those who keep on hurting us as a way of overcoming their unkindness. It is to be patient with those who keep on being nasty as a way of overcoming their nastiness.

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Peterson says it this way, “Perseverance is not resignation, putting up with things the way they are, staying in the same old rut year after year, or being a doormat for people to wipe their feet on. Endurance is not a desperate hanging on but a traveling from strength to strength.....Perseverance is triumphant and alive...It is not the result of our determination, it is the result of God’s faithfulness. We survive in the way of faith not because we have extraordinary stamina, but because God is righteous, because God sticks with us.

The kingdom of God is like two adult sisters who consistently rub each other the wrong way. Most often, there is an uneasy peace and polite conversation, but every so often, anger blazes forth, words are said, feelings are hurt. But this one thing they have in common. They are women of faith. They know enough to apologize; they know enough to look each other in the eyes and express their regrets. As the years go on, they care more about encouraging each other in the faith than in being right. They ask Jesus to wash them clean one more time, and as they do so, all is well. And one more time, they are able to practice a long obedience in the same direction. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.