

11th Sunday After Pentecost

August 16, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28

[¹⁰ [Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand:¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?”¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.”¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.”¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding?¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”]

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

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SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

Perseverance can be one of the hardest qualities to maintain in being faithful. This can be especially true when we feel lost, abandoned, alone, or in continuous grief. I don’t know about you, but my faith has sure been tested during this year of 2020. With the feeling of having my



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freedom stripped away due to COVID-19 and the increased sadness of not knowing when ministry will become “normal” again; with having watched the horror of violent protests and riots breakout across the country; seeing the list of COVID related deaths in this country grow and grow; enduring the hardship of seeing that many people in this country will still not take this pandemic seriously; and having just watched the aftermath of a land based hurricane cause so much destruction back in Cedar Rapids, Iowa this past week, my faith has been tested. This, of course, doesn’t even include my own personal struggles like the death of my beloved cat Izzy and my recent hospitalization a couple of weeks ago.

I’m sure all of us have had our faith tested at times during this COVID-19 pandemic because of the pandemic itself but also because of our own personal struggles as well. And when these things continue to occur, it can be really challenging to persevere in faith and not give up on God.

Thankfully, I’m sure all of us, when times do get tough, have those certain role models whom we turn to in order to encourage us to keep going and endure when it feels like we should just give up. One of these role models for me is the blessed saint, the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. When I learned about Dr. King and his story, which included all the hardships he had to endure during the Civil Rights Movement—a bombing at his home; being wrongfully jailed; being beaten while peacefully protesting; his family being constantly threatened; his own life being constantly threatened—and learned that in spite of it all he continued to proclaim a gospel of love that recognized the sacredness in all races of humanity; that he continued to lead a movement for change against heavy oppression; I knew that he was one I could always turn to when things got tough. Now, I’m sure even Dr. King had his moments where he greatly struggled with his faith, but he continued to persevere through it, to the very end.

Now, there is another role model that we can also turn to in order to remind ourselves to persevere, and that is the Canaanite woman in our gospel story today. This woman had a daughter possessed by demons and was in serious need of being cured. She had also heard that Jesus was passing through the area and knew that she must act. Having found Jesus she cries out to him, letting him know that she is a believer: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David...”

Upon hearing these words, we and Jesus know that the Canaanite woman believes Jesus to be the messiah, for this woman calls Jesus the son of David. It was very much understood by the Jewish religious authorities at the time that the messiah would come from King David’s line.



But for whatever reason, Jesus ignores her cry and pays no attention to her. I'm sure, for a short moment at least, this woman may have paused wondering if she found the wrong person or began to doubt that the stories of Jesus' miraculous healings were true. Perhaps he wasn't the Son of God? But as quickly as that thought comes, she shakes it out of her mind, she must persist in getting Jesus' attention, so she continued to cry out to him.

This woman, in fact, becomes so persistent in her cries for help that she begins to greatly annoy Jesus' disciples. They begin to plead with Jesus to send her away. But all Jesus simply says to them is: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and continues on his way. Now, not only had Jesus ignored the woman up to this point but has also just now claimed that his ministry isn't for her. Yet, the woman doesn't give up.

The woman finally reaches Jesus and approaches him so they are face to face. She kneels before him and pleads her case once more. This time Jesus calls her a dog: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did Jesus just insult this woman in the hope to finally get rid of her? Whatever the case, this Canaanite woman still refuses to give up and responds in a way that she knows will finally cause Jesus to act. She tells Jesus: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." In other words she is saying, "I may be a dog and not a lost sheep of Israel, because I am a Canaanite and not an Israelite, but I have heard your teaching, I have been fed by your word, and I believe you are the Son of God." At this statement Jesus praises the woman's faith and immediately heals her daughter. She did it; she persevered. No matter how long it took God to respond, this woman never gave up on Jesus and continued to pursue him.

This woman's willingness to persevere and not give up, even when she was being ignored, even when the disciples tried to shew her away, and even when she is called a dog, this woman continued to trust that God would remain faithful to his love and would act out of mercy in the end. It is a good teaching moment for us to remember that sometimes faith means we need to persevere and keep going even when it feels like God is ignoring us. For part of having faith is trusting in the promise that God will remain faithful to the promise of resurrection and redemption.

Thankfully, good news for us, our faith continues to be nurtured by God's never-ending love. One of the reasons we gather in worship each week is that God can fill our hearts with gifts of grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness through the liturgy, the word, and the sacraments. Everything we do in worship points us to God's loving action in our lives and in the world.



Worship reminds us that God is still very much present and active in our lives so that we can continue to persevere in the midst of difficult times.

But this is also why God surrounds us with a faith community for support as well. God knows it is difficult to have to endure and persevere the hardships of life by ourselves, so God gives us the gift of others to walk the journey with us. The people of this faith community are those we can turn to when the burdens we carry are too big to hold by ourselves. I know for myself that, the support and encouragement I have received since I came out and told all of you about the progression of my kidney disease through my August newsletter article, has been amazing. I know many of you are praying for me and are cheering for me as I work towards my goals of becoming healthier. I feel the love. Like me, I hope that you too will find (or have found) comfort and support in this amazing community of Christians.

Thankfully, God also tries to find other ways to remind us of the hope of the resurrection throughout our lives so that we can continue to persevere. Whether it is in the form of unexpected encouraging words from a friend or stranger; whether it is a gesture of kindness we experience; the beauty of creation; or a bit of good news in the midst of so much bad; God shows us that there continues to be hope for us and our world, which continues to fuel our faith so that we don't give up.

Whether it is through the gift of worship, the gift of faith community, or the unexpected gifts of hope, God does indeed remain faithful to the promise of resurrection and will continue to fill us with love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness so that we can continue to persevere, knowing that light and not darkness; resurrection and not death; and new life is worth striving for, for when all is said and done, that is what God has promised.

Amen.



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