

## God's call to Perseverance

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, April 29, 2018

The Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

Evensong

Luke 4:16-30; Hebrews 12:1-14

*Hebrews 12:1-14 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children-- "My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts." Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*

*Luke 4:16-30 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

In our second reading today, Jesus is in the Synagogue at Nazareth, his home town. This is, in the Gospel according to Luke, the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus stands up to read from the prophet Isaiah about proclaiming the Lord's favor for those who are oppressed. He then sits down to preach (that's how they preached in that culture).

He tells them that this prophecy is fulfilled in him. The people are excited, until Jesus challenges them to see how this message is good news not just for them, but for the gentiles and people of other nations as well. God calls all people to follow him. This enrages the people and they try to kill Jesus. It seems that for Jesus, as for his followers, ministry is not always easy. People don't always want to hear the Good News, especially if it challenges how they think already.

And yet, this is only the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus goes on to persevere in his ministry. He continues to bring good news and challenge the people to a deeper devotion to God. He perseveres all the way to the cross, and indeed perseveres to the resurrection and new life.

The author of our second reading from Hebrews picks up this theme. The author is most likely a preacher, and this section especially uses the rhetoric of preaching. The preacher of Hebrews addresses those who are tired out and persecuted for their faith. He encourages them to endure, to persevere in the faith, looking to Jesus who has gone before us.

Some in the audience feel like they are being disciplined by God, but the preacher reminds them that only true children—only true heirs are disciplined by parents. The preacher is saying that we are beloved by God as God's children. Even when we walk in the midst of challenges, God is strengthening us in the experience as a father helps his children to strengthen and mature in difficulty. The preacher encourages them to endure hardship, to accept God's correction where he gives it, and to persevere in following Jesus.

This passage in Hebrews comes right after chapter 11, where the preacher gives a long list of those heroes of the faith who have gone before us and who also have persevered "by faith." "By faith" Abraham waited on the promise, by faith Isaac became the father of nations, by faith, Jacob, by faith Joseph, by faith Moses, by faith David, by faith the prophets all persevered in service to God awaiting the promise of God's grace.

"Therefore," the preacher writes, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses—" all these heroes of the faith who have gone before us and persevered—all these heroes who surround us like a stadium full of supporters, watching the end of a marathon as we approach the finish line—"since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," waiting for us like a king at the finish line, ready to lay on our heads the laurel wreath of victory.

Stirring, isn't it? The preacher knows his craft.

So what about you? Can you hear the preacher's message today? Do you feel tired? Of course, we all have days where we don't want to get up to go to work or to school or to church. We have days where being there for others or doing the right thing is exhausting, and where failure or lack of results is discouraging. How can marathon runners keep their pace? How can teachers in rough neighborhoods continue to give of themselves for their students? How can Cleveland Browns fans continue to cheer for another year?

For you as a Christian, where do you get tired? Do your obligations at church get tiring? Or do you grow weary of a culture increasingly hostile to Christian devotion? Perhaps the hard work of reconciliation feels too much for you when you feel drained already?

Let me return to my passing illustration. No, not the one about the Browns, though I still hold out hope. And not so much the Marathoner either. Think about teachers who have persevered and

made a difference. Each of us can remember a teacher, or perhaps a coach or mentor who made a lasting difference in our lives.

Teaching is a tough job—so many students don't want to be there and so many others struggle enough in their own lives that they are barely able to show up to school. And yet, so many teachers come back day after day and pour their hearts into their students. Rarely do they see the difference that they make in someone's life. They are not miracle workers, and very few achieve fame and honors. Most of them get chewed out by parents and administrators as part of their job. Why should they keep going?

The truth is that many of those same irate parents will always remember the perseverance of those hard teachers—the ones who really worked to bring out the best in their students. We all know someone who stayed with us through hard times, who believed in us and invested precious time and energy with us, and whose memory we will always hold onto.

There was a movie years ago with Richard Dreyfuss called “Mr. Holland’s Opus.” It was about a high school music teacher who had dreams of composing orchestra music. But he had to teach to support himself and his family. As the movie goes on, his dreams fade into the background and he faces hardship in his family and in his job. And yet, he stays faithful—to his family and to his students, even when the orchestra gets cut and he has to lead a marching band instead. Finally the whole music program gets cut, and he has to move on to something new. The movie doesn't end with him achieving his dream. We don't know what happened next. But we do see in the faces of his family and his students past and present what his perseverance and devotion meant to them. His perseverance was his greatest symphony.

What a difference these teachers and mentors make in the lives of others—and in our lives! And you know that so many people are hungry for someone who will share that same perseverance with them! My friends, you can make that kind of difference! I'm sure that you are not a wonder worker, or an expert, but just your love for God and your commitment to others can make a huge difference for them! Will you step forward to run with perseverance the race that is set before you, looking to Jesus? More than you know, your perseverance as a disciple of Jesus is an enormous source of strength for those around you—even for those who criticize your faith.

Think of those who mentored you as a Christian, those who walked with you through tough times. Remember how they gained strength from Jesus to persevere and to show love to you. Think of all those who have run that race and encouraged you, all those who by faith sought to follow Jesus. They gave you a precious and durable gift. Will you now share that gift with others? Surrounded by their witness, and looking to Jesus, will you join them in that race?

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, ...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”