

September 6th, 2009

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

Love Always Perseveres

1 Corinthians 13:7 and Mark 12:1-12

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The greatest lesson I ever learned about perseverance came from a lowly brook trout. Some years ago I found myself wearing rubber pants and standing thigh-deep in the cool, clear waters of the Salmon Trout River in Houghton County. I was absent-mindedly flicking my line upon the waters enjoying a quiet summer evening in the backcountry when suddenly my line went tight and I was in a fight with a really nice 12-inch brookie. Now of all God's creatures, the brook trout is by far the slickest and slipperiest thing on earth. I netted him and carefully put the net and the fish all the way into the creel for fear of losing my prize. I gently removed the hook, and as I admired him lying there, he gave one last mighty flop and squirted straight up out of the creel, came down and bounced off the side and back into the stream. He took off like a shot under the opposite bank as I stood there in shock and awe. Then, through my anger and grief, I heard him speak to me, and he said, "Never give up!" That's perseverance, and the Bible says love always perseveres.

The great theologian of the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas defined perseverance in this way: It is the long persistence in any kind of difficult good. The Bible tells us two things about perseverance: 1) it is God's gift to us, and 2) it is our responsibility.

In our scripture today the tenant farmers demonstrate a kind of perseverance—they persevere in an unjust cause. They persevere in rebellion against the owner. Rebellion is the essence of sin. Their rebellion starts in violence and escalates in cruelty to murder. Jesus' reference is not too veiled; he is accusing the religious leaders of his day of resisting God. We can admire their determination, but we are rightly horrified by their cause and their methods.

I knew a man once who was addicted to rage. He craved the adrenaline rush that came with angry shouting, outbursts and threats. He felt himself justified in every case. After each outburst he felt much better but he was totally oblivious to the destruction he caused in his children, his wife, and his co-workers. He couldn't understand why his life was falling apart and no one liked to be with him. This only made him angry and

increased the frequency of his tirades and threats. He thought he was persistent by keeping on doing the same things and hoping different results. This is the very definition of insanity.

We human beings are the tenant-farmers in the story. We keep hoping that by perseverance in our sin and rebellion we can eventually make a better life. But the results we get are fatherless children, women in poverty, and men in despair and loneliness. The symptoms of our disease can be seen in addiction, soaring rates of personal and national debt and warfare in our homes and between nations. The owner of the vineyard is God and we seem to be doing everything in our power to drive him out of our personal and public life.

It is the land owner—God—who demonstrates to us the meaning of perseverance in this story. He loves his tenant-farmers and he will not give up on them. He keeps reaching out to them right up to and including sending his only son. By the way, there is that same phrase again from Genesis 22 that we looked at last week, “the only begotten son.” The cross of Jesus Christ is the great demonstration of God’s love in human history. There is nothing you could ever do to make God stop loving you. You can ignore God, disbelieve God, run from God but you can’t make him stop loving you. As long as you breathe, God will keep sending the messengers of his love into your life.

There is a dark note of judgment in the parable in verse 9. If we persevere in rejecting the love of God in Christ, there is no hope for us. We will lose the vineyard along with life itself. What possible life could anyone really have if they place themselves outside of the love of God?

Perseverance is God’s gift to us. His love for us perseveres, and we can take great comfort and assurance from that great truth. Jesus said, “I give my sheep eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10:27) We can count on God’s gift of persistent love. He will not grow tired or weary or weak against any foe who might strive against his love.

This is where we should learn our perseverance. It is not only a gift to us but it is our responsibility. Jesus said, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:13) and “those who hear the word...by persevering produce a crop.” (Luke 8:15)

There is literally nothing really good in life that does not require perseverance, and this is particularly true of love in marriage, in family life or in any form of human community. This is something our wired generation with its expectations of instant communication, quick fixes and instant results has lost. Persistence in love over time makes a marriage, a life, a church, a just nation.

William Wilberforce was elected to the British parliament in 1780. He became a Christian in 1785 partly under the influence of John Newton, a former slave trader turned Anglican priest who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace” With the encouragement of none other than our own John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, Wilberforce began a life long crusade against the practice of slavery. Those profiting from the slave trade resisted him. Those who despised his evangelical faith opposed him, complaining that he was allowing religion to invade public life. He introduced bills to abolish slavery 11 times and failed 11 times. Finally in 1807, with Wilberforce, ill with a sickness that soon would take his life, parliament voted to abolish the slave trade. Love always perseveres.

Barbara Lucchesi was a long-time Methodist. She came down with Alzheimer’s disease and soon could no longer get out. For ten years, her husband Ace was her full time caregiver. He never left her side, except occasionally he got out to grocery shop and run errands. He gave up golfing and hunting. One day when I was visiting, I thanking him for the love and care he was showing. I told him it was an inspiration to me and everyone in the community. He said this, “She’s my baby. She took care of me for 35 years, and now it’s my turn to take care of her.” Wow. That is real love because love always perseveres.

Love will be tested by suffering, by persecution, by disappointment, by temptation and by weariness in doing good. The Bible is a drama that demonstrates how God’s love for us has been tested again and again and is never found wanting. God’s love perseveres, and on this foundation we can live with confidence. The church is called to be a compassionate community. A compassion community knows that it will be tested in the practice of love, and the temptation will always be to despair and to give up. But it is the nature of love to persevere. Wilberforce knew that. Ace Lucchesi knew that because that

is who Jesus is and always will be. Thanks be to God for the gift of love that always perseveres.