

# Persevere

## *A Sermon for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost*

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John Edward Miller

Interim Associate Rector

Grace and Holy Trinity Church

*As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

- 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

*Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

- Luke 18:1-8

## The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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In today's excerpt from his second letter to Timothy, Paul is teaching his young protégé about the importance of focus in the life of faith. He urges Timothy to keep his eye on the ball as he goes about his work as an apostle. Like a father writing to his son, Paul encourages Timothy, saying: "As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." With this he taps on Timothy's conscience, referring to the young man's grandmother and mother<sup>1</sup>, who spoon-fed him the biblical basis of his Christian belief. Even if that sounds like manipulation, it was influence for a good cause.

Paul is clearly concerned about Timothy. He knows what the young man is encountering out there in the mission field – distractions galore, temptations all over the place, and ideas that cause ears to itch with enticement, and that undermine and disable faith. So it's understandable that the elder apostle wants Timothy, who represents the next generation, to keep his eye on the ball. Paul's prose is extremely personal here. "As for you, [my son], always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry

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<sup>1</sup> Lois and Eunice, respectively – see II Timothy 1:5.

out your ministry fully.” Letters like this landed in many a college mail box before party weekends. I certainly got my share of them!

Paul presses him to stay on track, persevere, and finish strong. He emphasizes that working with focus and full commitment can affect the future in ways that we cannot see in the moment. If we can hold fast to our purpose, and carry out our ministry, God’s kingdom will advance. Paul stresses perseverance as a virtue. A believer is one who persists in loving God and neighbor without reservation, and in spite of opposition. If one is mindful of purpose and stays with the tasks of ministry, God will work to complete and make whole that which seems partial and transitory in the present moment. Paul’s plea is echoed by Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s great theologians, who put it this way;

*Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.<sup>2</sup>*

Every time I have entered Richmond’s Susan Komen event, I am struck by the realization that there is movement toward that great day when breast cancer’s cure will be found. I may not be there when the end is achieved. Indeed, everyone who currently walks or runs that race may be gone. Nevertheless, each moment of forward progress, each small step toward the goal, matters. It is a cumulative process; the end depends on the means. So, determination and participation, persistence and perseverance are necessary for the realization of a cherished dream. And, along the way, every victory – however small or partial – is a victory for everyone else, including those who did not, or will not make it to the goal line. Although

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<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

progress is not automatic, we just keep passing the baton forward despite setbacks and disappointment. That is an act of faith, hope, and love.

This is true of anything of final value, including the coming kingdom of God. It takes confidence to carry on in the face of challenge – such as changes of popular attitude toward the value of the church in everyday life. Many think that we are in the midst of a major paradigm shift in religious behavior. Not only are members attending services less frequently (studies indicate that “regular” attendance may be once or twice a month), but there also appears to be a general “lack of interest in religion.” Baby boomers and the several generations younger than they are less inclined to seek fulfillment in “organized religion.” There are so many options available nowadays – from sports and fitness to therapy and spiritual journey-ing – that the church cherished by earlier generations is simply one choice among the many available in this virtual world of earthly delights.

Since the early 2000s, when our Episcopal church got embroiled in controversy, lawsuits, and secession, it appears as though confidence in the institution of the church began to wane. As the decade wore on, most mainstream churches were affected by decline in attendance. I think that this is due in part to a societal (and religious) trend – **a shift away from serving to being served**. Today’s spiritual hunger parallels everything else in this consumer society. The trend is disturbing. It seems as if we have taken our eye off the ball, and as a result, have lost sight of the ministry that has been so faithfully passed to us by our forebears. What suits us **now** has blocked our vision of future good for the sake of God and our neighbor.

I know that I am preaching to the choir – literally and figuratively, but I also trust that you are aware that we are in the midst of change. This is the time for us to bear down, and persevere. With confidence in God’s guidance,

we can see an opportunity to read current trends and plot a new course for the future – one that is both relevant to today’s issues and true to the aims of the gospel. In the history of the church this has happened before – think of the Renaissance and Reformation, the Enlightenment and Age of Science, the Great Awakening, the Oxford Movement, and the ecumenical era. At each of these junctures, God’s people have paid attention, faced the winds of change, and made adjustments in the church’s mission to find new directions that addressed current concerns while also holding fast to the purpose of the church and its ministries. For over two millennia, the church has kept the faith and persevered. It is now our time to do the same.

Kenneth Clark was one of those rare individuals that could trace the course of cultural history on a global scale. His famous BBC series, “Civilisation: A Personal View,” came out just as I was entering seminary. And, like many of you, I sat transfixed as he explained, week-to-week, the unfolding drama of challenge, adaptation, and refreshment that continually affected the development of western civilization. His erudite lectures, which were delivered on famous sites, and illustrated with art and music of the various periods, dovetailed wonderfully with my classroom experience at Union Seminary. I shall never forget it.

One memory that is particularly vivid is Clark’s description of a tiny island in Scotland’s Inner Hebrides where a small community of monks persevered when everything was collapsing in Europe. Rome had fallen, and with it the imperial infrastructure that supported the spread of Christianity. It was a dark time, when civilization was reeling from repeated punches from brutal invaders. The learning, the art, and the religious faith that characterized Graeco-Roman culture were on the ropes, and the prospects for survival were not good. Then came an Irish monk to the isle of Iona, and

there he founded a monastery where scribes preserved holy writ and knowledge, and prayed for strength to endure and to hold fast to the faith of Christ. Their works survive, their prayers were answered, and we have inherited the baton they passed to us.

Clark stood on the windy shores of that little island, which still serves as a spiritual center, and eloquently stated the case for perseverance. He said:

*I never come to Iona – and I used to come here almost every year when I was young – without the feeling that ‘some God is in this place.’ It isn’t as awe-inspiring as some other holy places – Delphi or Assisi. But Iona gives one more than anywhere else I know a sense of peace and inner freedom. What does it? The light, which floods round on every side? The lie of the land which, coming after the solemn hills of Mull, seems strangely like Greece, like Delos, even? The combination of wine-dark sea, white sand and pink granite? Or is it the memory of those holy men who for two centuries kept western civilization alive?*

*Iona was founded by St Columba, who came here from Ireland in the year 543. It seems to have been a sacred spot before he came and for four centuries it was the centre of Celtic Christianity. There are said to have been three hundred and sixty large stone crosses on the island, nearly all of which were thrown into the sea during the Reformation. No one knows which of the surviving Celtic manuscripts were produced there and which in the Northumbrian island of Lindisfarne; and it really doesn’t matter, because they are all in what we rightly consider an Irish style. They are all beautifully written and their clear, round lettering carried the word of God all over the western world.<sup>3</sup>*

The monks of Iona fought the good fight, they finished the race, and they kept the faith. What we take for granted they struggled to preserve, for us. Their focus, steadfastness, and mindfulness of the future, made possible our civilization, with its freedom to practice and promote our faith. This is what God can do with people who are grateful for his love – people who persevere, trusting what Paul wrote to Timothy:

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), pp. 10-11.

*. . . always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

In the Name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, let this be our response to the high calling to serve. Amen.