
17th Sunday after Pentecost 2020
2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1 & Matthew 15:21-28

Noah Webster spent 36 years writing his dictionary, crossing the Atlantic twice to gather material. The poet Milton got up at 4:00 am every day to have enough hours for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Gibbon spent 26 years on his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bryant rewrote one of his poetic masterpieces 99 times before publication, and it became a classic. (Today in the Word, August 1990.)

What do you suppose keeps people going when they seem to fight for lost causes? It's because they believe in the rightness of their cause no matter what the odds are or what the world says.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus seems harsh toward the Canaanite Woman, but He does so for a purpose. He is testing the seriousness of her faith. He didn't love her less because she was a Gentile but wanted to see how persistent she would be in solving her problems. (Matthew 15:21-28)

Jesus and His disciples were in a region just north of Galilee near Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile territory. A woman came to Jesus with her sick daughter seeking Jesus' help for her child. That help did not come easily. When the Woman asked Jesus for help, He didn't say a word in response. Imagine how painful it would be to ask for help and have it ignored. She then turned to Jesus' disciples, and they rebuffed her. But the Woman would not take "no" for an answer. She kept right on pleading. The disciples went to Jesus and said, "This woman is driving us crazy!" Finally, Jesus spoke to the Woman and said: "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus meant, "You are ineligible for my services because you are not a Jew." For most people, this would have ended the conversation. This Woman acted as if she did not hear what Jesus said, only to repeat the same appeal, "Help me, Lord."

Then Jesus made another inexplicable statement: "It is not right to take the food of sons and daughters and throw it to the dogs." Jesus' response is puzzling, as is the Woman's reaction to it. Her response had a note of self-effacing humour. She took a humiliating insult and used it to reinforce her appeal. She said, "True, Lord, but the dogs do eat the scraps that fall from their master's table." Jesus responded: "Woman, you have great faith. Your wish will come to pass."

The story ends with Jesus praising the Woman for her faith and giving her the help, she was seeking. This Gospel lesson shows us how much faith we desperately need but seldom consider.

The Canaanite Woman had ample opportunity to turn around and walk away. She was ignored, rebuffed, and rejected. No one would have blamed her for giving up! But when one appeal failed, she tried another. When one door remained shut, she knocked on another. Finally, her perseverance paid off for her prayer was answered.

Jesus admired her faith and commended it. To Him, the willingness to keep on seeking and asking expressed belief. The Woman believed in something that would not let her quit. She cared more for someone else than for herself. She made her child's need her own need. The health of her daughter was worth any sacrifice. Jesus understood this faith because it

was like His faith. His commitment was to the kingdom of God. His constant prayer was: "May your kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus wanted this more than anything else. He offered to make any personal sacrifice, including death by crucifixion if it would help bring God's kingdom on earth.

Perseverance most often comes from our personal experience for a cause. One other element is still needed. The Woman not only believed in her cause, but she also thought it would happen. Without such faith, she would have abandoned her dream long ago.

We all admire individuals who believe in a great cause and believe it can happen. These individuals understand that the results may take some time to accomplish. It may not occur in a person's lifetime. But, if it's God's will, it will come to pass at the appropriate time. By the grace of sticking with a demanding program, even when we don't get the results that we expect is a challenge. Perseverance is when the real test of our devotion to a cause occurs.

We are amazed at the bravery of those who refuse to give up through years of struggle and striving. We can learn something from them that will help us keep going when no one else seems to care. Their efforts can be compared to the postage stamps. Postage stamps are getting more expensive, but at least they have one attribute that most of us could emulate: they stick to one thing until they get there. There are no stricter people in this world than those devoted to a morally right, just, or loving cause and stick to it until they get there.

Amen!