

Endurance

Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Hebrews 10:35-39



Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

In our text today, it’s all about endurance. To illustrate this, I want to share a story about endurance from my previous hometown of Durban, South Africa. Very close to my old congregation in South Africa, Gandhi had established his first spiritual community. His settlement was located on a hill there about 5 kilometers away from our church. There is an interesting story about Gandhi’s settlement in regard to endurance. In summer, it often rained heavily making the gravel road to Gandhi’s settlement slippery as glass and impassable. It was clear to all that the road had to be paved with asphalt. Yet how should the project be financed? Gandhi had a brilliant, if not almost crazy, idea. Everyone who visited the settlement should bring a medium-sized stone with them. These stones were then used as pavement on the path. In this way, a passable road was created over the years. What Gandhi did is a lesson in endurance because there is an immense power in many people working together patiently and tirelessly. Just imagine what great things we could achieve if all the congregation members came to church every Sunday and placed just one Euro in the offering plate.

Today, the book of Hebrews encourages us to have endurance. And in doing so, it talks about the path that God walks with us. Christians aren’t given an asphalted highway to heaven either. As Paul tells us in Romans 8:24, “in this hope we were saved.” The ultimate redemption and salvation in Christ are at first not visible to our eyes. Our faith, therefore, means that we have a long and difficult path ahead of us. Sometimes, the simple bricks that we lay down in faith may seem meaningless. Some might ask: “Does it still make sense to pray or go to church? Why are we still praying for justice in Iran and other countries? It doesn’t seem to change anything at all.” The ultimate goal of holiness seems to be too far away for us. The further this goal recedes into the background, the less it seems to make sense to take the small steps in faith. We become weary in prayer, we stop reading the Bible, and at some point, we ask ourselves: “Why do I even go to church anymore? It doesn’t do any good anyway.”

On the path that Christians take, we can’t always immediately recognize the goal. The present invades our lives and often overwhelms our faith. When we look at the path of God’s people, we realize that this path has always been difficult. The path of Christians throughout history is paved not only with stones, but also with blood and tears. It is not an asphalt road but a desert wandering. There are always situations in which we no longer recognize the destination. There are times in which we have the feeling that God has abandoned us. There are also times in which God’s children leave their faith all at once. They do this for various reasons: because of persecution, because they are overwhelmed by the worries of the world, lack of understanding of faith, or disappointment in the church. We also ask ourselves: how will the church continue if we can no longer effectively pass on faith to our children. In the book of Hebrews, it talks about such Christians who have become weary. It talks about weak knees and hands, about people who were once courageous and strong in faith, but now seem weak and helpless. What does the book of Hebrews give us as support for weak Christians on the path of faith? What can carry us and strengthen us? When one urges people who have become weary to be patient and to persevere, and to stand against all opposition as solid as rock, it can lead to stubbornness and rigidity. There is a danger that we do the things that belong to faith mechanically, without understanding why we do them or what their purpose is. This is exactly what this letter makes us wary of. It is

apparent that the book of Hebrews never speaks about endurance by itself because endurance on its own can lead to this rigidity. Instead, the author combines endurance with faith. That's why this letter urges us: "Therefore do not throw away your confidence!" Let's look at the example of Gandhi's road in South Africa. At that time when he called on his followers to carry stones up the mountain, it was in the hope that one day, the community would have a road. When we as Christians are baptized, go to church, receive Holy Communion, read the Bible, and pray, we also do this in hope. But before us is not just the prospect of reaching a certain goal. Before us stands Jesus Christ Himself. The actions that we take are not laborious steps to achieve a goal through patience and hard work. No, our hope is inseparably connected to the risen Lord Jesus. This Lord Jesus doesn't just work His way into our lives at some point, but gifts us even now with strength and faith. That's why we aren't just allowed to know that Jesus died and rose again for us, but we may also experience how He gives all of that to us. The dark doors of time and life are broken so that we don't just see our weary bodies but Jesus Christ in us. And He does this through the means of His Word and Holy Communion. Endurance, then, doesn't mean that we must renew our weak faith through our own strength to believe or persevere against all odds. We don't have to try hard to practice endurance. Rather our faith lives from the fact that God Himself is patient and steps into our lives.

However, He doesn't do this by breaking through human boundaries and suddenly standing before us, but by working within our humanity. God doesn't break the laws of nature, but He acts within them. That's why God meets us in such normal things like water at baptism or bread and wine at Holy Communion. In many cases, Christians in the past and even today have asked: "Couldn't God speak to us more directly? Couldn't He simply solve all the problems of the world so that we know that He is our God? Or could He at least come to me through an angel and show me the way?" But God doesn't work like that. He allows us to walk through the desert for a time and not see Him.

We can't say why God does this or why it lasts so long until He comes again. We only know this is how it is. In this situation in which we live, Jesus Himself is of vital importance. The Lord Jesus promised us that He is with us "to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20b) When the book of Hebrews says that the Hebrews have become dull or weak in faith, this means nothing else than that they have lost the connection to this Lord Jesus Himself. A feature of the earliest churches was that the Lord Jesus often was portrayed as the good Shepherd. The congregation would be reminded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The Hebrews must have known this as well. A good shepherd is a good shepherd precisely because he is there and he doesn't leave the sheep. And he is especially never far away when the need is greatest. Maybe it is the case with us Christians, that this connection to the Living Christ has become frozen or dulled. In this case, it could be that we chase after this or another goal with effort, but we are ultimately always disappointed. Perhaps we are oppressed by other terrible lords who are the exact opposite of a good shepherd. Yes, even in our day and age, there are people who masquerade as good shepherds but they really aren't. Instead, they try to turn us from Jesus or separate us from Him – separated from the Lord Jesus, our life is like slavery. The demands I place on myself and others can be overwhelming. In such moments, we must always have this picture of the Living Christ who changes our lives before us. We owe it to ourselves and our fellow man to lead them to this Lord Jesus. Only in this way will we experience with them that we are not slaves of an unmerciful fate, but children. We are not subject to the laws of matter or evolution, but to the person of Jesus Christ. When He is in our midst, we receive unending strength of faith and endurance.

We have a God who exists not only in the far reaches of the seventh heaven, but a God who is with His flock and who comforts them in every need and cares for them. This is the source and foundation of our endurance. Through Him, we can walk hand in hand and achieve great things as a church and congregation with small steps. Amen.