

The Power of Perseverance

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Matthew 15: 21-28

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

In 1895, a young boy found himself the man of the house after his father passed away. He was the oldest of five children and at the age of 7 found himself learning to cook and care for his family. As the boy grew up he had a variety of jobs. At the age 40 he decided to try to make some money by selling chicken dishes in a service station. He did well and eventually opened a restaurant. However, every time he started to make a way for himself, something happened and eventually the restaurant closed due to a fire. After WWII, he decided he wanted to try to sell his chicken again, this time wanting to franchise his restaurant. He was rejected 1,009 times before anyone accepted it. And once it was accepted it began to take off and Kentucky Fried Chicken was born.

Thomas Edison, in an effort to create the lightbulb, failed 1000 times. But he kept trying and wouldn't give up until he got it right. He is quoted as saying, "I didn't fail 1000 times. The light bulb was an invention with 1000 steps."

As a divorced woman and single mother, she found herself living off of government subsidies and trying desperately to find a way to help herself and her children. She loved to write and had big ideas for a children's series. She decided she needed to try and find a publishing deal in order to hopefully help her gain some independence. Publisher after publisher after publisher turned her down. She found herself extremely depressed, but pushing through in order to help her children. Finally she got the book deal she was waiting for. Because of her persistence, J.K Rowling became a household name and generations of children know and will know the stories about a boy named Harry Potter.

Jackie Robinson's determination to never give up landed him as one of the greatest baseball players to ever live. While Jackie was great for baseball, baseball was not the nicest to him. He was hit with balls when up to bat and was treated with extreme hate by players and fans alike. There were teams who refused to play against Robinson and even a manager taunted him and encouraged his players to do the same. Jackie never gave up and was a 6 time major league baseball All-Star and Hall of Famer. He helped pave the way for people of all races to play Major League Baseball and baseball is better because of Jackie's persistence.

Isabella Baumfree was bought and sold into slavery 4 times before taking her infant daughter and running away. She found her way to New York the year before the New York Emancipation Act went into effect. She met up with a Quaker family who took her in and bought her freedom for \$20. While there she had a spiritual awakening and began to preach. Later, she found the strength to sue a white man for the custody of her child who

had illegally been sold into slavery. She won her case becoming the first black woman to win such a case. Isabella changed her name to that of Sojourner Truth. She answered her call to preach and became an activist in both the abolitionist movement and the women's rights movement. Despite all the odds being against her, she used her calling to ministry to speak up and fight for justice and equality.

Persistence is having the quality that allows someone to continue doing something or trying to do something even though it is difficult or opposed by other people.

Persistence is important because it means that we believe in something to the point of fighting for it and not giving up. Persistence means that we keep going even when someone tells us that what we want cannot be had for one reason or another. It means we have a cause we believe is worth fighting for. Persistence is so hard when the cards are continuously stacked against you and you feel as if no matter how hard you try, you are fighting a losing battle.

The Canaanite woman was one who would not take no for an answer when it came to helping her daughter. She was a woman of persistence and through her perseverance helped to create a shift in the ministry of Jesus. He went from saying his purpose was for Israel to knowing his unlimited power was for all people.

Jesus and his followers are being questioned by the Pharisees who are observing as to why the disciples are breaking with the traditional teachings of the Jewish law and eating food that is considered unclean in ways that are considered unclean. Jesus begins to discuss the things that truly make one ritually unclean-what separates a person from the holy community and the holiness of God. Jesus makes the declaration that it is not what enters the mouth that makes one unclean, rather it is what comes out that. In other words, it is not what comes from the outside that separates us from holiness, but what comes from the inside out. It is what comes from the heart, through our expressions of speech and the way we act that separate us from the holy community and from God. Jesus tries to explain to those gathered this new interpretation of the law. It is what comes through words and deeds that show what is really inside us and through those actions we have the opportunity to be close to others and God or to cause division and separation from God and God's holy creation.

Jesus and his disciples leave that place and begin heading to a new location. Here he hears a woman address him using language that would later be heard as a part of Christian worship services, "Lord," "Son of David," "have mercy on me." These words sound prayerful as she calls on Jesus for help.

Jesus has journeyed to a Gentile area, but does not want to help the people there. It feels as if Jesus is hoping to find a little privacy, but instead finds himself being called on once again. Jesus doesn't answer in the way we

want him to answer. In fact, I struggle with his answer. I struggle a lot with his answer. Jesus' answer sounds both racist and sexist. He has just told the Pharisees that it is what comes out that separates us from God and one another and here he is moments later allowing the ugliness to come out of his own mouth. I can only explain this through saying that sometimes when we say affirmations of faith we find ourselves saying that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. Well, right here, I think it is safe to say that we are seeing Jesus as fully human. And we as humans know how our words and actions can cause great harm and tear people and communities apart. This is not holy, rather it is extremely unholy.

While many would be shocked and saddened and disappointed at the way this "Celebrity encounter" has gone wrong, the Canaanite woman persists. She has more on the line-the well being of her child, and she is not going to give up so easily. After all, Jesus is known as the great physician and can you imagine any physician saying they refuse to treat a child? If there are some who would refuse treatment for a child because of their race or gender then perhaps they should rethink their profession. But here is Jesus, saying No. Explaining that he only came for the Jews.

She doesn't give up. She kneels before him, begging, worshiping him, and his response is that he cannot help the dogs.

Now you must understand, this has been interpreted over the years as meaning a cute little puppy, part of the family. That is NOT what Jesus meant. The Jewish community of his day did not keep dogs as pets. They did not love dogs. They thought of dogs as scavengers and unclean animals who eat unclean things. Dogs were not beloved animals let alone pets. But this woman turns this around for Jesus. You see, in the Gentile context a dog is a part of the family, not "at the table" eating dinner, but they do sit under the table and wait for the crumbs to fall.

Jesus sees this woman's perseverance as faith and heals her child. Martin Luther interpreted this story as illustrating that God's ultimate yes is hidden in the preliminary no; true faith is persistent faithfulness, holding God to be true to God's own character revealed in Jesus.

It seems to be through the Canaanite woman that a shift takes place and Jesus is reminded that he came not just for Israel, but that his saving power and grace is for all people. It also feels as if Jesus is reminded by the Canaanite woman of who he is and whose he is. For a brief moment Jesus showed that what comes out of our mouths and the actions of our hearts can cause harm, but this woman wouldn't give up as she reminded him of who he is and his purpose for being here.

At Christ's table there is room for everyone. Not just one race or one kind of people, but Christ came for all and invites all to join in the great feast where God's grace, mercy, and love are unending. This is God's ultimate plan: to bless all nations, to bring all people into God's kingdom.

It can be easy for us to give up and want to take the easy way out, especially when we are tired and cranky and want to be left alone. It can be easy, in our grumpiness and exhaustion to say things that are harmful and to deny help to those in need. It is easy, in our grouchiness, to let feelings that are not loving or kind over take our hearts and to let those thoughts and our actions reveal themselves through our words and deeds. Even Jesus struggled with this. Which, in my opinion, makes Jesus even more relatable to us as humans.

But we know that we are to never give up on God's creation. We are called to let our hearts be filled with love towards others and to serve others as Christ has served us. This service knows no limitations. We don't discriminate on who receives what and why and how. It is not up to us to decide who is worthy, because in God's eyes, all are a part of God's creation and all are worthy of being made well, of being included in part of the holy community, in being invited to sit at Christ's table. And yet, so many are turning down the opportunity to be a part of the community and we wonder why?

We fail to see how the church universal has caused more harm throughout history than good. All too often the church has denied people Christ's love and has allowed the unclean thoughts the opportunity to come out to play through words and actions. The church has a history of NOT doing what Christ taught us to do. The church has a history of discrimination, racism, ageism, and sexism. Too many clergy members and church staff have gotten away with breaking codes of ethics and violating the covenant they made with God to care for their church members, instead causing great harm to those in their care. Too many church members have said unkind things to members. Have said children are to be seen and not heard and not cared for those within their own communities who are sick, grieving, or hurting in ways physically, mentally, or even financially. In many places church has become more of a country club than a place of spiritual growth.

It's no wonder that churches everywhere are struggling. It's no wonder, because for centuries we have forgotten who we are and whose we are. For centuries we have focused on who we are to help and who we will not help. For centuries we have forgotten that we, as a church, are to be Christ's body in the world, serving all people from all places and all backgrounds without discrimination and with love and care for all God's creation. And I am tired of feeling as if my faith is being held hostage by those who don't understand that God is a God of love and kindness and grace and hope and mercy.

I could give up. We could give up. Christ could give up. It would be easy to throw in the towel, but we don't give up. We continue to remind ourselves and one another of the greater mission of Christ and the call to, "love one another" and to "love God, love neighbor and love self." We

continue to work towards change in the world through mission and service as we reclaim our faith day after day after day admitting to our faults and doing our best to turn the tides so the church may be a place of love and welcoming spirit for all of God's people. We continue to press forward. We continue to fight the good fight. When we continue to persevere, nothing can stop us from bringing God's kingdom here to this earth.

James N Watkins, author, speaker and pastor's husband, once said, "A river cuts through a rock not because of its power but because of its persistence." May our persistence to be a TRUE reflection of Christ in the world continue until we can be the change we need in the world. Amen.