

"Pointless Persistence"

Text: John 5:1-9

God grant to each of us not only the gifts of grace, mercy, and peace, but an ongoing understanding of, and appreciation for, those incredible blessings. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

A man named Jack graduated from Harvard with a B.A. in Chinese history. For 26 years, from 1967-1993, he worked at a variety of different jobs – none of which were related to Chinese history. Then in 1993 he had an idea for a book, wrote the book, hired an agent, and began trying to sell his book to publishing companies. In fact he pitched the book to 130 different publishers and was turned down 130 times. His idea was to tell the inspirational stories of 100 different individuals, and 130 publishers in a row turned him down, assuring him that no one would want to read something like that. After 130 rejections, his agent also quit.

I wonder how many here would have taken the hint and given up? When virtually every professional in the field was of the unanimous opinion that yours was a bad idea, how many would have the persistence to carry on?

Jack persisted, and finally found a small, self-help book publisher in Florida that agreed to publish his book. The rest, as they say, is history, as Jack Canfield's "bad idea," *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, became one of the best-selling books (and then series) in the history of publishing, now including over 250 follow-on books and having sold over 500 million copies. At one point Mr. Canfield had 7 different books on the New York Times Best-Seller List at the same time, a record unequalled by any other author in history.

Yet for every Jack Canfield there are countless others whose persistence ended in abject failure – countless individuals whose ideas weren't unrecognized jewels but just plain bad ideas. How is anyone supposed to know the difference? How can anyone ever know if persistence is the key to eventual success or if it represents just stubborn foolishness?

This morning's text will help to answer that question, but obviously on a much higher plane than earthly fame and fortune. That text is God's Word recorded in John's Gospel, the 5th Chapter:

ESV **John 5:1-9** *After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ² ¶ Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a*

pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. ³ In these lay a multitude of invalids--blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁴ ⁵ One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" ⁷ The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me." ⁸ Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." ⁹ ¶ And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

This is God's words. That our God would richly bless us through the study of his perfect Word this morning, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by the truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!"** Amen.

What is your opinion of the persistence of the invalid in our text? Unable to walk for 38 years, day after day, year after year he sat waiting by that pool in Jerusalem, hoping desperately to be healed.

Some background might be helpful here concerning that Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. Why, for example, did the blind, lame, and paralyzed spend their time there? We would be left wondering except that some manuscripts of John's Gospel include a verse 4 (which was not included in the ESV translation of our text): **"For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had."** Some believe that that verse was actually a note added by a scribe as he copied the original manuscript. The thought is that the scribe intended only to try to explain why all those needy souls were sitting around that particular pool, and that his note was later mistakenly copied as part of the original. Some are disturbed to learn that such "discrepancies" or "variants" even exist. We shouldn't be. While copyists did make errors, not a single doctrine of Scripture is ever called into question. God himself saw to that – miraculously so. In other words, nothing that we teach or believe is ever established on the basis of, or called into question by, a variant reading. Not one doctrine.

What that means specifically in connection with our text is that we shouldn't insist that the Bible teaches that an angel would come down and stir the waters of the pool, and that the first one in would always be healed. While that may have been the case, what we *can* say for certain is that that is what the sick and disabled evidently believed, and that that is why they were there. The man in our text clearly believed it

to be true, since when Jesus asked him, ***"Do you want to be made well?"*** the man answered Him, ***"Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me."*** The man obviously believed that the pool periodically possessed an amazing power to heal.

Was the man's persistence wise or foolish? To be fair, the man himself probably felt he had no other options. We can only imagine his frustration as, year after year, he struggled to be the first one in the water, only to have someone else jump in before him.

Most of us would think of the poor, afflicted soul in our text as kind of pathetic, but lovable. There is just something in us that wants to help people like this. We find ourselves wishing we could have been there for him. We would also undoubtedly therefore admire his persistence. Yet here is where we learn something about misguided persistence – persistence that works toward the wrong goal and must therefore be abandoned.

Most of us tend to be guided, *driven*, much more powerfully by what we *see* and *experience* than by what we simply *know* – the physical rather than the spiritual. It would break our hearts to see the poor man desperately struggle, year after year, to be the first into the pool, only to see him fail, year after year. But shouldn't we feel even more empathy for those that God himself sees as persisting on a futile path to destruction? Our greatest concern ought to be for those who do not know and believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, those whose feet are therefore not on the path to eternal life. They persist on a path to destruction, and they need to be introduced to their Savior.

You and I tend to be guided most powerfully by what we can actually see and verify with our eyes. Those who are living in unbelief often appear to be anything but needy. In fact they often appear to have it all. They often seem healthy, successful, satisfied, and content. They don't *look* like they need our help, but they do.

That's exactly why Jesus didn't make his Great Commission to the Christian Church something like, *"Go and help the poor and sick of every nation, feeding and clothing them."* He said, ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."*** The difference is that we don't tend to see what God sees. We don't always notice what God notices. We don't consistently recognize pointless persistence as God does.

God sees every single human being – apart from Jesus Christ – as living a life of pointless persistence. Not only is every human being sinful, none of us has either the power or the means to correct our own problem - but we naturally imagine that we do. Human beings naturally assume that we can, somehow, by our own actions, make things right with God. It is only the Word of God that can disabuse us of that universal misconception and turn us from that stubborn path to destruction.

Not to be too hard on the guy, but when Jesus asked the poor soul in our text ***"Do you want to be healed?"*** his answer was not good. It was actually rather pathetic. As far as we know he may have been trying to be first into that pool without success for 38 years. More to the point this morning is the fact that he gave such an answer to the God-man Jesus, the Creator and Savior of the world. At the very moment when he was experiencing his own encounter with his Savior, he was yearning for something else. The crippled man found himself in the presence of *the Son of God*, who was offering him both healing of the body and eternal life for his soul, yet the man insisted on looking not to Christ as the provider, but to his own failing struggle to gain what he wanted.

This account is actually therefore a microcosm of exactly how every single human being naturally approaches both his God and his own hope for salvation. Man is always most comfortable persisting in and relying on his own efforts – even in the face of repeated, perfectly consistent, failure. On our own, we know no other way, even though the way we in which we naturally persist ends always and only in failure. Having never once succeeded, the man in our text was evidently perfectly content to keep trying the same thing. Why? Because he knew of no other way. Even when he encountered Jesus, who offered him another way, he hadn't the faintest idea that Jesus was referring to anything other than the pool and the man's own feeble, fruitless efforts.

That is exactly and always the natural state of every human being apart from Jesus Christ – a pointless persistence on a course of action that leads always and only to eternal destruction. God sees man's futile attempt to pay for his own sins (and thereby make himself worthy of His love) not as commendable persistence but as damning unbelief. Though the Savior has great compassion for those who exist in this state, and longs to win them, he has bound himself to sentence all who die in this unbelief to the fires of hell on Judgment Day. All who

imagine that they are or were good enough all on their own to earn heaven will be condemned without mercy. That is the condition represented by the cripple in our text, who struggled in vain for 38 years to supply his own cure.

The good news here is not only that Jesus cured the poor soul in our text, but that Jesus cured every poor pathetic wretch in this building today. Think of the joy of that man when Jesus finally cured him. Think of the weight that was lifted and how his spirit must have soared. That's our joy, only on a much deeper, more profound level. Yet to truly appreciate what we have been given we need first to come to terms with just how pathetic we were, and would be again, without Jesus Christ. What we could never accomplish, Jesus did for us – all on his own. On the cross he provided the goodness that paid for our sins. Every single one of them. You and I are forgiven, healed, declared to be righteous and sinless by God the Father himself. That declaration he confirmed by raising Jesus from the dead on Easter morning – God the Father's eternal, immutable declaration that the sum total of all sins has been paid in full. We who once existed as God's enemies have now been transformed into his holy children. That was our encounter with this same Jesus – when he rescued us through the power of his Word.

Yet our text leaves us with a subtle warning that's easy to miss, one last hint of trouble yet to come: ***And that day was the Sabbath.*** The scribes and Pharisees latched onto this one fact to the exclusion of all others. They ignored the fact that an amazing miracle had obviously been performed, missed completely the fact that this incident exactly paralleled their own futile struggle to earn heaven by their own works, and stubbornly pushed from their minds the irrefutable evidence that Jesus was immeasurably more than the fraud that they made him out to be. All this they ignored, focusing only on the fact that this astonishing miracle, this amazing life-changing encounter, had taken place on the Sabbath – which, in their minds, invalidated the whole event as just another violation of the Law.

Understand that that same evil still resides in your own old Adam, your own sinful flesh. Jesus underscored the ongoing danger every Christian faces when later He sought out the man that He had healed and said to him, ***"See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you."*** The ***"worse"*** thing would, of course, have been dying in unbelief. Know then that persisting in sin carries the terrible power to bring about that "worse thing" by destroying that astounding miracle of saving faith that has been performed also in you. May God the Holy Spirit, who performed in us this incredible miracle when he brought us to faith in Jesus Christ,

preserve that faith in each of us, for persisting in the Christian faith is anything but pointless. Amen.

ESV **Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23** And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God. Her light *was* like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. ¹² Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are *the names* of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: ¹³ three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. ¹⁴ Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. ²² ¶ But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb *is* its light.

ESV **Acts 16:9-15** And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. ¹¹ ¶ Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next *day* came to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met *there*. ¹⁴ Now a certain woman named Lydia heard *us*. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵ And when she and her household were baptized, she begged *us*, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us.

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The Fifth Sunday after Easter – May 22, 2022

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 744 (Verses 1, 3-4) *(Brown Hymnal)*

"How Great Thou Art"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

The First Lesson: (Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23) Heaven is again the subject of our reading from the Book of Revelation. We want to focus not so much on the literal pictures that John saw and recorded, but on the fact that heaven will be glorious beyond our wildest dreams – beyond man's ability to imagine. All is a gift from our Savior. Rejoice in the inheritance that is yours through faith in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 30 (Page 34) (Read responsively) *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Second Lesson: (Acts 16:9-15) Paul had the benefit of miraculous visions to guide him in his missionary travels. Though we do not have such visions today, we do have the same powerful Word of God, which is every bit as amazing today as it was in Paul's day. Still today that Word is reaching out with the power of God himself to those who do not yet know their Savior Jesus. Satan therefore knows that the best way to neutralize the power of God's Word is to convince us not to share it.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – revised *(On Screens only)*

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 777 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Amazing Grace"

The Sermon – Text: John 5:1-9 *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

"Pointless Persistence"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 778 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Grace Has a Thrilling Sound"

The Preparation for Holy Communion *(Brown Hymnal page 17)*

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving *(Brown Hymnal page 20)*

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 659 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Feed Thy Children, God Most Holy"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!
To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (33) Average (30)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Tue-Thu	-10:00 a.m.	– WCDC in Lakewood
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor John Hein has returned the call to Immanuel of Winter Haven. Pastor David Ude is considering the call to Redemption of Lynnwood. West Central Delegate Conference is scheduled for Tuesday through Thursday of this week in Denver.

Church Council Notes – All Council members attended the meeting on 5/15. Treasurer Mantz reported offerings fell short of budgeted needs by \$3,931 in April. The General Fund fell to a negative balance of \$3,800. Some adjustments were made to the online donation feature on our website. Next meeting is June 19th.

Summer Schedule and VBS – Today is the last Sunday of our regular schedule. VBS has been scheduled for July 18-22.

Daily Rest – Subscriptions for the devotional Daily Rest are due for renewal. Please consult the sheet on the mailbox table. Payment can be dropped into the offering box and need not be specially marked.

Online Contributions – As requested, an online contribution feature has been added to our website.