

Sermon 2009 Last Sunday of the Church Year

11-22-09

Text: Jude 20-25

Theme: "Perseverance Not Preservation?"

Preserve and Persevere are two words with great similarity in sound and look but great difference in meaning. All letters in common, letter order only slightly different, commonly mistaken for one another when readers read them aloud.

Yet preserve is from the Latin root *servare* which means to watch over. Thus to preserve something is to keep it alive or in existence; make it lasting; or to watch over it.

And persevere, also from Latin means to persist in anything undertaken; maintain a purpose in spite of difficulty, obstacles, or discouragement; continue steadfastly.

They have such similar look but such dissimilar meaning. One is to keep something in existence and the other is to move forward in spite of the obstacles. Now please note that in our prayer of the day today we asked God to help us persevere, not preserve.

I have heard many pastors pray this prayer of the day on the Last Sunday of the Church Year and many times I have heard them ask God to so govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of Your glorious return, we may preserve in both faith and holiness of living. A misreading? Perhaps. Or maybe a Freudian slip because I think the Church would prefer to be preserved instead of having to persevere.

Every congregation I have served has a league of preservationists in it. It's not a formal committee but we all seem to join it from time to time. I don't care what you do around here but don't mess with the: now fill in the blank. Fill in the blank and you've got whatever it is you're trying to preserve. One congregation I served never wanted their building dirtied. Another never wanted their social clubs interrupted. Another never wanted to risk their prestige of being the biggest church in the area, another just wanted plenty of money in the bank. Each of them thought of itself as a forward thinking congregation who was serious about service to the Lord but the mentality was that of preservation.

But the Church is not a museum where we preserve the past and carefully package the saints for shipment to heaven where they will be on display for eternity. O Lord, govern our hearts and minds that we may preserve in both faith and holiness. Lord let us take these saints, wrap them in bubble wrap and ship them off to their eternal reward. And until their shipping day, the community can admire them as lovely works of art, created for their enjoyment.

No, the Church is a working farm. We struggle and strive to grow the strongest, heartiest, most plentiful crops we can and it is no easy task for the farmer. There are few jobs harder than the job of a farmer, especially a small farmer who tries to live off his farm. There are constant assaults against his crops, drought, flood, wind, hail and pests all the things that make us stay inside and read a book can be devastating to a farmer who can work his fingers to the bone and see everything he has accomplished vanish from his sight is just a few days. So in this day and age, it is easy for a farmer to give up, sell the farm off to a large corporate entity and just get a regular job. It is hard for him to persevere in the face of disaster upon disaster.

Similarly, the Church faces constant assaults from the world around us. We have people arguing against faith and demanding material proof for everything that once was just accepted as true because the Bible said so. We have attacks on our children through movies, magazines and various media telling them that they have to look a certain way, or own certain clothes. We have the devil constantly trying to convince us that our worth is connected to something we do rather than who we are and he sends his minions to derail the things we do or distract us from the things we do so that we might believe that we are worthless. But that is not consistent with what the Bible says. Look at our text from Jude.

Remember now that Jude was one of the brothers of Jesus, so this is no theologian in an ivory tower who has never had to deal with the pain and difficulty of life. This is a man who

watched his brother executed for nothing. He stood by and saw his mother tormented at the foot of the cross. Jude says,

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”

We pray to him who is able to keep us from stumbling. We pray that prayer today, the Last Sunday of the Church Year as we look towards the finish line. We are running the race that Christ put us here to run and today we get a glimpse of the goal and we are reminded that we cannot win by ourselves. Don't bother trying to preserve what you have. Don't bother rolling up the draw bridge and barring the windows. It is too much for us. We cannot stave off the powers of Hell by trying to preserve the outward vestures of the Church. Europe tried that and now what once were magnificent cathedrals built to the glory of God, are concert halls at best. We cannot win by wrapping ourselves in bubble wrap and trying to wait out the tempest. So what do you do when you are in a situation where you can see the goal but you know you are against unrelenting odds? What do you do when there is terror on every side and none of the old tricks in the proverbial bag seem to work very well. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you put your head down, dig in and press forward. That's what you do.

Now is not the time for remembering the good old days. We are not a congregation with 700 people worshipping here every week. We do not live in a community where everyone goes to church. We do not even live in a community where most people are Christian. By and large, most congregations are museum pieces my friends in a world that has moved on. That is why the outside world laughs at the ELCA arguing over whether gay people should be pastors or not. For the world, that is archaic, similar to arguing over whether African Americans can be property or not. That's why the outside world is laughing at Rome, the Orthodox and the LCMS for defending ordination for males only. For the world that is like discussing whether the earth is flat or round. They have moved on and assume that they know the correct answer. Of course we have a different answer from the world because we have a different basis, but we have got to quit worrying about preserving the fortress and begin striving to witness the truth of the Bible to a dying and lost world.

That is scary folks. That means we stop protecting our savings accounts and endowment funds and use money as a tool to buy the tools we need to proclaim the Gospel. That means that we stop saying that we just don't have time or energy to volunteer at church and we put our heads down, dig in and do what needs to be done. And that means that we have to constantly ask the question, “How does whatever we are doing proclaim the truth of the Gospel?” Because if it doesn't, we may not have the resources for that kind of luxury anymore, or we might have to choose to put our resources behind something that does a better job of proclamation.

It is an unnerving time for us in America because we have watched the demise of Christianity first in the Holy Land and then in Europe and so we know that it can happen. All it will take is for us to do nothing, to preserve our church and become a museum where the lost can come and see what life was like before the world moved on. But that does not have to happen.

God empowers us with his Word to do what needs to be done. He feeds us with his own body and blood so that we will have the strength to persevere and have faith that even in the face of overwhelming odds, our calling is to move forward and let God handle the details. He washes us in the holy waters of Baptism and we know without a doubt that the gates of Hell shall not prevail against His Church and we strive until our last breath to see that Hell does not prevail against this congregation either. Persevere my friends. It is what we do as soldiers of the cross. AMEN.