



1506 Orchard Terrace
Linden, NJ 07036-3807
Office: 908.486.3073
Fax: 908.486.3079
www.lindenpres.org

Pastor:
Rev. Dr. William C. Weaver
Manse: 908.925.4939

Sermon for Sunday, August 14, 2011

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 56: 1, 6-7
Psalm 67
Matthew 15: 21-28
Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32
Sermon Title: "A Pain in God's Neck"
Sermon Topic: The Persistence of Faith
Sermon Purpose: To teach that we need to be tenacious in talking with God about our concerns.

.....
Sermon Prayer: God, Whose love reigns supreme in the world; mediate Your message to us this hour; that we may know Your will and be able to love You with our whole heart, mind, and strength; through Christ, Who intercedes on our behalf and Who bestows upon us His marvelous grace. Amen.

In 1970, I was in my junior year of college and there was a particular course that was well known because it was extremely easy. Although there were a **few** more demands than "Basket Weaving 101," the grading curve was relatively easy in comparison to my Criminology, Psychology, Shakespeare, or Near East & African History courses. As word got around about this class, more and more people signed up for it so they could get a better grade and improve their grade point average.

The longest line on the day of registration was the one to get into this class. (Remember, these were the days before "on-line registration" and computer generated class lists. Files of index cards became the class lists. Department Supervisors and Deans had to physically sign authorizations for exceeding class size limits.)

This **particular** semester, this class was so full there was "standing room only." Coaches had sent some of their athletes to register for this class so they would remain on the eligibility lists. Advisors had sent students to register because this "easy grade" would mean these students could stay in school or keep their scholarships. I was in this Creative Writing class for two reasons: First, it was part of the "core curriculum" for English Education majors; and, Second, I had been interested in writing all my life, and I wanted to learn how to do it the right way.

The professor of this class was a Dr. John Taylor: about four foot ten inches tall, medium build, graying red beard that went to his chest, bushy graying red hair circling a bald spot that looked like a yarmulke, and deep blue eyes that you just **knew** could see through walls.

The class met Tuesdays and Thursdays for two hours each session. At the first lecture Dr. Taylor made some **startling** statements. He said, "I know that many of you have taken this course because you've heard it's an easy grade. Therefore, you're going to find **this** semester a very **different** situation. I've seen some samplings of the writing talent on this campus and it's



abysmal! I've decided if you're going to represent the quality of education this college provides, you're going to have to learn how to speak and to write well ... and creatively!" Then, Dr. Taylor handed out the 40-page syllabus of the class work - and **it was overwhelming!**

He began to talk about the eighteen (**18**) critiques of various authors and poets we would write, the number of presentations we would have to make, the 5 major writing projects we would be preparing, the number of times each of us would be expected to have a private meeting with him, and the number of hours he expected each of his students to put into his class. He concluded his remarks by informing the students that if they were going to be in this class, they would have to work "harder than they had ever worked in a class before," and that there would be very few B's (and only three A's) given this semester.

After that first class, **another** long line formed in the registrar's office. This time it was the "**drop and add**" line of those students who wanted to transfer **out** of Dr. Taylor's class and get into a different one!

At the **second** meeting of that Creative Writing class, there were less than half as many students as there were the first time. It seemed they had "dropped like flies." Drove of students had made their way into such courses as "Music Appreciation," "Swimming and Water Safety," and even "Introduction to Communication Arts." When Dr. Taylor came into the classroom for that second meeting of "Creative Writing," he walked to his desk, stopped, slowly gazed around the room, and then slowly allowed this impish smile to emerge through his graying red beard. Eyes twinkling and almost chuckling, he said, "Now I want to inform you that this course is going to be **exactly** the same as it has **always** been. You can throw away that hideous syllabus that I gave you last time, because **none** of that will apply. There will be **very few** critiques due in this class and there will be no exams. There **will** be a project due, every two weeks, on the various writing styles we will be studying. Also, I intend to be just as generous in my grading curve as I have always been. You see, now that we have sorted out those students who are **more** interested in the **grade** but, are **not** really serious about **learning and writing**, we can get on with the actual **scholarship** at hand. Now that we know who are the really serious students about this subject, we can get on with our education and not have to worry about grades."

The students of that class who were **really** serious about the subject (or who had **no other option**) were willing to stick with the course, even when it demanded a great deal of work. Those who were **not** very serious left at the first sign of difficulty.

Today's Gospel lesson is about tenacious faith and the courage that it inspires: a faith that will not give up. This woman is "on the outside looking in." She's not a Jew, and so she's not part of the crowd that Jesus has been talking to - again and again - as He teaches and preaches. But, she has heard about Him and she just knows He can help. Even when Jesus puts her off, the woman will not go away. She loves her daughter and she's going to hang on until she gets the help that she needs. And even when Jesus seems to insult her, she won't take "no" for an answer.

My theory is that Jesus doesn't really insult her. I think that maybe Jesus is saying these words about the dog with His tongue in His cheek. He is saying it as something the people of her time might very well have said about Gentiles. When Jesus uses the image of taking food from a child and giving it to a dog, I think He might be saying that with a little glint in His eye, letting her know that even though that has been said about her - and, possibly, even to her, Jesus doesn't believe it, Himself. And, of course, in the end, Jesus does go ahead and heal her daughter.

The point of all of this is the woman's tremendous faith which gave her the courage to approach Jesus, in the first place - and then, to keep her coming back. She won't be put off! She won't take "no" for an answer. She trusts Jesus and she's going to stay with Him, and harass Him, until He helps her.



In contrast to that, I think of a few people who have said, "I don't believe in prayer. I tried it once. I prayed real hard for something, and I didn't get it. I haven't prayed since. Forget it. It **just doesn't work!** I tried it, once. I know!"

Persistence is a measure of the depth of our faith. If we pray for something and it doesn't happen, and then, we just drop it; well, then we have to sit down and ask ourselves how important it really was, in the first place. Don't we spend our time and our energy with those things in our lives that are very important? Like the college class I mentioned in the beginning, if it's something that we really care about, we'll stick with it even if it's difficult! But, if we give up at the first sign of difficulty, then maybe we weren't all that serious about it in the first place.

I think our Gospel Lesson is telling us, today, "Don't be afraid to talk to God again and again about the parts of your life that really matter to you." As this story tells us - don't be afraid to be a pain in God's neck! In what really matters we are persistent. God expects that.

There is another important element to see in this story of the woman's faith. She is not only concerned about her daughter's situation; she's doing something about it. She doesn't just sit at home, wring her hands, and pray for her daughter's healing. She gets out and takes definite action to make something happen.

Apparently, the woman has heard about Jesus' healings. She has tremendous faith that Jesus can, and will, heal her daughter. So, she gets to her feet, goes to find this Jesus person, and asks for His help. And, even though she is put off - and turned back, and ignored - she persists until she gets what she needs.

Her faith is not just a quiet, sit-at-home faith, it's a get-up-and-help-it-happen faith. She knows how serious she is by her action. In doing that, she demonstrates how deep her faith really is. Her approach to Jesus is a combination of faith and action.

Over the years, I've have occasion to counsel with many people. All too often, I've heard teenagers complain about the collapse of their relationship with their parents. They've complained that their parents don't seem to care, anymore. It seems the parents have stopped giving them hugs, or a kiss goodnight before they go to bed. When I've asked them if they still gave the parents hugs or a goodnight kiss, the answer is often "No." When why they stopped, the answer is usually, "I stopped when they did." "Why not try giving your Mom and Dad a hug and a goodnight kiss? Maybe they think you've grown too big for such things. Maybe they need to see you still want and need it. Why don't you start doing it, again, and maybe they'll get back in the practice, too."

I've also had the opportunity to talk with some of our senior citizens. Many times, they've complained about how people have stopped caring about them, as if they don't matter, anymore. "After all," some have said, "I'm just a little, old lady and they should come to me." Well, my friends, they're not going to come to you unless you show them you care about someone other than yourselves. If you can reach out and care, and show it, then others will reach out and care about you - and show it.

We're not called to be the kind of Christian who sits at home and "grouses" about how the community is changing. We're called to get up and go out and make some changes to reclaim our community - block by block, if we have to. We're called to get up and get to know who's living in the house next door, and down the street. We're called to keep an eye on one another's property, so that - if our neighbor is away - we can call the police when we see a moving van pull up in front of our neighbor's home and start loading their furniture. We're called to care about other people and to show that we care. We're called to believe and to show our faith.

Keep on keeping on! That seems to be the direction that this story points us. Be tenacious in talking with God about your concerns. When we are persistent in approaching God it demonstrates how firmly we believe.



God doesn't always answer on the first ring. Why? I don't know. To put it into terms we might be able to understand, maybe He's busy with someone else at the time we place our call. Maybe He wants us to be sure our need is really that important. Maybe it's a test to see if our resolve and our faith is as strong as our understanding of our need. Maybe, in God's divine scheme of things, our timing is not "in synch" with His ultimate plan. But, whatever the reason, we demonstrate the depth of our commitment when we keep on calling to Jesus. We show how much we believe when we continue to ask. We ask, and we keep on asking, and all the time we work to help God make it happen. And then, we trust that it is God's will that it **will** happen.

Let us pray:

Ever-loving God, there are times we are mystified and even annoyed by the grace and patience you show with certain people - people who are annoying to us; people who are constantly complaining about their own needs to the exclusion of everyone else's; people who we don't think deserve another chance; people who we think are not carrying their share of the load; and people who we think ought to have to pay for their sins. Sometimes, we are proud of what we have done, and we believe we deserve extra consideration from your hand.

Teach us, Beneficent One, that we - as much as they - are recipients of Your patient grace. Help us to be persistent in our witness and persevering in prayer. And, Father, help us to work side by side in a good spirit for a common cause. In the precious name of Your Son, our Lord and Savior, and in service to His ministry, we pray by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

