

Finishing Strong - Sightsee in Holland

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James 4:13-17

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see. Open our ears that we might hear whatever word you have for us in these words. Open our hearts, God that we might feel. Then O God, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I want to begin today by asking you a question. What is the difference between being perseverant, persevering, being resilient and being stubborn and hardheaded and obstinate? Or as Moses referred to the Hebrew children – these “stiff necked Hebrews.” What’s the difference?

We’ve been talking about persevering and we’re using athletic images. Paul talks about fighting the good fight, running the good race, finishing the race. Two weeks ago we talked about a marathon race and how you persevere. How you push through the wall at 21 miles, and you just keep going, putting one foot in front of the other and how we persevere. Then last week we talked about the bicycle race - the Tour de France and how we want to be mountain climbers, and we face those difficult times. The really difficult times when we push through and learn in the midst of those difficult times.

Today I’m going to use an altogether different image – and that’s of a sailing race – a regatta. Now I know nothing about sailing. I’ve been on a sailboat, and I got seasick so it’s not great fun for me. But I have a friend who’s really a sailor. And he has a house in Florida where he goes down and spends time just racing his boat. He knows all about sailing. I called him and told him I was going to be talking about sailing in a regatta. I asked, “Can you help me understand it?”

So here’s the very first thing he taught me. I said, “So how does it work? Do you put sail up and you sail with the wind? The wind blows you and you go with the wind?” He said, “No, you don’t go with the wind. You can sail with the wind and that’s called running. That means you go in the direction the wind is going. But it’s really the slowest sailing. You can put the jib up and go that way, but the wind is generally not going as fast as you want to go. So you generally want to go across the wind. The first thing you need to know is that you don’t can’t go into the wind.”

He explained that on a 45-degree angle on either side of the way the wind is coming it's as he put it, "45 degrees starboard, 45 degrees port is called the 'no-go zone.'" You can't sail that way. And if you try, you're going to fail.

I think sometimes in our lives there's a "no-go zone." That all the perseverance in the world is not going to get you there. You can keep trying and keep trying, and you're going to fail. Because you can't go in that direction.

There's a little book by Seth Godin. I'm in awe of him because he has all these books that are about the length of one of my sermons and he's made about a million dollars on each of them. So I stand in awe of him. But he has a book that's called *The Dip*. Here's the subtitle: *The Dip: A Little Book {hence my point} That Teaches You When to Quit and When to Stick*. Here's what he writes: "Most of the time, we deal with the obstacles by persevering. Sometimes we get discouraged and turn to inspirational writing, like stuff from Vince Lombardi: 'Quitters never win, and winners never quit.' Bad advice. Winners quit all the time. They just quit the right stuff at the right time." (Seth Godin, *The Dip*).

He identifies three curves like in a geometric graph. One curve he calls "the dip." It's a great image. The dip is you start something and initially it's really hard. You think to yourself, "I just need to quit." But you don't quit. You keep your nose to the grindstone, your shoulder to the wheel. You keep pushing and keep working and you persevere and finally you come out of the dip and you're cruising. He said, "That's wonderful!" He said that a lot of the time if you just work hard enough, you'll get through it if you just persevere. But he said, "That's not the only curve. One curve I call 'the cul-de-sac.' It's a dead end. It's just a straight line that stops. And you can push and push, but it isn't going anywhere. And ultimately you realize, "This isn't happening." And you have to quit.

He said that the third one is really the worst. He calls it "The Cliff." You're going along and you're cruising and work and work and all of a sudden it falls right out from under you, and you fail and fail miserably. He said, "It's wise to quit before The Cliff."

I suspect almost all of you are familiar with what we call "The Serenity Prayer." It's used in 12-Step groups all over the country and the world. I know you know it, but I'm going to read it to you. Many of us don't actually know the second verse that I think is the most powerful part. I'm going to read the most recent version. It's gone on for so long. I'll explain the history in a moment. Here's the most recent version. "God give me the grace to accept with serenity the

things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace. Taking as Jesus did this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will. So that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next.”

This was written by a theologian and pastor in the 20th century, a very famous one named Reinhold Niebuhr. He wrote it first in his own journal in 1931 and in 1943 he used it in a sermon for the first time, and then published it in 1951. It is interesting. This is his version of it, and we can ponder why our culture has changed it. Here’s his version: “Father give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other.” (Reinhold Niebuhr).

Here’s what I’ve learned as I’ve gotten older. There is a whole lot of stuff in that Serenity side. There’s a whole lot of things I can’t change. For example, I can’t change you. I can try and use my influence, I can try and be an instrument of God, and I can work hard. But if something’s going to change inside you that’s between you and God. I can’t change you.

I can’t change my spouse. She can’t change me, as hard as she’s tried. We don’t change one another. We can’t, only they can change themselves. I can’t change the past. The past is done. Regrets have to remain regrets. I can’t change many of my circumstances. Some of them I can change but many of them I can’t. I will never play for the Astros. That horse has left the barn as they say. Even if wanted to I couldn’t change that. I’m not built that way; it’s not how God made me. I can’t change that. I can’t change age. There’s a billion-dollar industry that fights against the advance of age in our lives so that we seem not to give into it. It comes.

I had a conversation with one of our staff people this week and she was showing me a page in the upcoming “Spire” that has my column on it, and it had my picture there. I said, “Do we have to keep using the same picture? Can’t we find a different picture?” She said, “You want us to use the one in the hallway where you still have brown hair?” I thought, “I still have brown hair!” And she said, “Well, maybe a few of them.” So you can fight against it but it’s coming.

Look friends, we fight against dying. I will. As the poet Dylan Thomas said, “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” I’m going to rage against the dying of the light. But ultimately that’s something we all will get to. That’s why James says, and we read it a moment ago: “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you

ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance." (James 4:14b-16a).

You boast in your arrogance. You boast that if you just work hard enough you can make anything happen. No, sometimes you're in a no-go zone. So what are you supposed to do if you're in a no-go zone? What is a Christian to do?

Here's the thing about a regatta – about sailing. You tack. That's what it means when you turn, and you go across the wind. And the only way you make progress is by zigzagging back and forth and back and forth. Here's the neat part and this is why I preached this little segment I'm going to give you right now. It's that when it's time to turn – to tack – if it's a multi-handed regatta the skipper says, "Ready about!" And the crew responds, "Ready!" Then the skipper shouts "Lee Ho!" I love that – "Lee ho!" I'm going to start using that a lot. "Lee Ho!" It's time to turn. They crank the tiller, and everybody ducks because the boom is going to come, and the other hands on deck do those thingies...that's the technical term. They move the sail across and off they go back in the other direction. They turn – they tack.

Friends, for the last 18 months we've all learned how to tack. Every organization, every business, every family, every school, everything has had to learn, "We don't like this. I don't want it like this. But we have to figure out how to deal with it. We have to adapt." And just saying to ourselves, "I'm going to just be hardheaded and keep doing things the way I've always done it." Persevering isn't going to do it. You have to change, to turn – to tack.

We have an online ministry, and we started by setting up little iPhones in the living room on stands with those ring lights that drive you crazy. And all those things that we started along the way. You know, I long for the day when this room is full again and our children's ministry is packed full of parents crammed in the hallways, trying to get their kids in Sunday School classes. I do believe that's going to come back again, and I'm anxious for it, longing for it. Just to have the choir process makes my heart leap! And yet, I'm aware that it's not going to be the same ever again. We're not going back to before. We have an online ministry now that we've learned how to do. So we're reaching more people in our Zoom Bible Studies than we did in person. We're going to keep doing both. Online ministry is not going away. We have reached people all over the country, all over the world that we never would have reached before. As some people move away and tell their friends, "Hey, we're worshipping online at St. Luke's. You ought to do that."

We have to adapt. We have to tack.

So how does that work in our personal lives? I'm going to share a few relatively long quotes with you and that's because I want to share these in the words of the people who experienced and wrote them. That's instead of me just telling their stories.

This is on from Sharon Pereira: "I tried to live with it. But when he drove our children to school while he was drunk that was the last straw. I could have lived with the fact that he had neglected our new house or spent what little money we had on alcohol but his endangering our children was a step too far. In 2009 I decided to give the man I still loved so deeply an ultimatum: 'Get help or the children and I will leave.' Needless to say, he did not get the help he needed, and the children and I moved into a rental property. I divorced him in August 2009, and it was the hardest thing I've ever done. I felt like a failure. I felt as though my life had been turned upside down, like a death had occurred. But it was what I needed to do. And it was the first step toward the right future for myself and my children." (Sharon Pereira).

Last week I told you the story about a couple who had experienced an extramarital relationship, an extramarital affair. They pushed through and did the hard work to rebuild their marriage, to reestablish trust. It ended up with a marriage that was happier and holier than ever before. But it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes you have to tack.

A man named Allen Rucker writes this: "It was like an anvil fell out of the sky, went through the roof and hit me in the back. It was that sudden. I fell on the ground and that's when I panicked and called a doctor. I was unable to move my legs. At the hospital a neurologist came in and immediately knew what it was. It's called transverse myelitis. I have been paralyzed from the waist down for the last 21 years. I was in mourning for a long time. I lost half my body. I lost my legs. It was like I had to wait around for each brain cell to accept that. Ann Marie and I had some tough times because this was such a shock. And then we realized "This is it; you know. This is our reality." So we had to change our lives accordingly. We both found a little humility and empathy for others. There is this phenomenon called 'Post Traumatic Growth' where people often right after a tragedy reinvent themselves and grow as opposed to fall apart. I changed careers. I used to be a television writer, but my work was kind of sporadic. Instead of making television shows, all of a sudden, I started writing books...you're reinventing yourself. There's no rulebook. There's no guide. It's about going back to life." (Allen Rucker).

Allen Rucker's book is called *Best Seat in the House*.

So when you're in a no-go zone you don't just keep trying to sail into the wind. You don't really have a choice – you tack. You turn.

This is why James says this. Listen to what we read a moment ago: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring.” (James 4:13-14a).

We don't know what the future will hold. We make our plans, we set our dreams, we put our goals out there, we commit ourselves to being perseverant and doing everything it takes to make those things happen. And who knows what tomorrow will bring? So you have to be willing to tack.

A friend shared with us a parable that was written about families who are dealing with special needs children. Or have special needs children. It was written in 1987 and it's circulated among the community of families of special needs children. For some people it really resonates and speaks to their hearts. For others not so much. But I think it has broader application. It's by Emily Perl Kingsley and it was written like I said in 1987. She writes “I'm often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability, to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it. To imagine how it would feel. It's like this. When you're going to have a baby it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks, and you make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum, the David by Michelangelo, the gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting. And then after months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go.

“Several hours later the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, ‘Welcome to Holland!’” Holland, you say, what do you mean? I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy and all my life I've dreamed of Italy. Well, there's been a change of the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay. The Important thing is that they haven't take you to a place that is a horrible disgusting filthy place full of pestilence, famine and disease. But it's a different place. So you must go out and buy new guidebooks and you must learn a whole new language and you've met a whole new group of people who you've never met. It's a different place. Slower paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while, and you catch your breath you look around and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills. And

Holland has tulips. And Holland even has Rembrandts. But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy. And they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life you'll say 'Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I'd planned.' And the pain of that will never go away. Because the loss of that dream was a significant loss. But ...if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things...about Holland." (Emily Perl Kingsley).

This has broad applications for us. This is our lives. We can persevere towards what we think we've planned, and then life happens. It happens in all sorts of different ways. And we have to tack. Have to change – to turn and go in a different direction.

Now here's the marvelous news. And I come back to this every Sunday while we're in this perseverance series. The finish line is the same. If you're on one of those long races – the long regattas – what happens is that each skipper takes a different way. They tack at different places and go different ways. They are using their strategy. But they all end up at the same place. The finish line is still there. God has promised that God will put it all back together again. And that that which is wrong will be made right. And that which is broken will be healed. So we long for that day. We look forward to that day. Even James says that. In the very next chapter – in James 5 he says, "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near...Indeed we call blessed those who have shown endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." (James 5:7-8, 11).

Ultimately, God will finish this for us. And you know what we'll do? We'll put away our weather-beaten yachts, put them in the slip, and go ashore. And join the after-race party. And it will be wonderful. But until that time we have to enjoy the race. And sometimes that means we have to tack. Lee-ho!

Let's pray. *Gracious God, we want to persevere but sometimes we need to not just keep bashing our heads in the same direction. But to be tuned to the flow of your will and to your purposes, to your Holy Spirit in whatever circumstance. And to make the changes, the adaptations we need to make as life comes our way. Show us how to do that. Give us that*

serenity we long for, but also the courage to change not just our circumstance, but even our attitudes. That we might make those adaptations we need to make. That we can enjoy the journey and get to the finish line together. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.