

# *“Persevere”*

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20, I Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28**

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January 31, 2021

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 31, 2021, 4th Sunday after Epiphany, dedicated to my daughter, Ms. Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens Stadie, to Dr. Lynn Wallich, our 2019 and 2020 Moderator, to Mr. Alec Deitz, our 2019-2020 Moderator-Elect and incoming 2021 Moderator, to all the Church Council members who served so faithfully for the past two years and to all who will be elected today, our 169th Annual Congregational Meeting, to our entire Church Staff and their families and always to the Glory of God!

## “Persevere”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20, I Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The word “**persevere**” appears once in the Bible according to the New Revised Standard Version and not at all in the King James Version. In fact, the word perseverance doesn’t appear. Persistent and persistence don’t appear.

“Persevere” can be found in Ephesians 6:18. Paul calls his sisters and brothers to *‘Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and*

*supplication. To that end keep alert and **always persevere in supplication for all the saints.***” While patience, endurance, and patient endurance, steadfastness, enduring steadfast love, never growing weary of doing good, fearlessness in suffering, and standing firm in our faith – all work together to produce the essence and the fruits of perseverance – the verb **persevere** and her sister noun, **perseverance** – have no presence in our Holy Scripture.

Perhaps **Perseverance’s** absence from the Holy Bible can be attributable to the word’s creation in the 14th Century AD. (That seems to be a good grounding for a book much older than that.) From the Latin, we find *perseverens* “very strict, earnest,” from **per** “very” + **severus** “serious, grave, strict, austere.”

To **persevere** means: “*to persist in what one has undertaken, to pursue steadily a design or course, to continue against all odds, to endure and move steadfastly forward, to be tough in overcoming whatever you face.*”

The verb **Persevere** and her sister the noun, **Perseverance** have moved into my house and my soul in recent weeks and months. It feels like every day presents new tests and conditions for persevering. We are all being called to Persevere at a time such as this.

To that end, I shared this perseverance prayer with our staff and church leaders a few weeks ago as we were entering this new year and trying to balance the budget once again in the midst of a pandemic and all of the economic challenges. It went like this:

*“Lord, there are days I want to quit,  
and there are days whose coming I dread.*

*There are days - I can imagine disasters that will never be,*

*and gains I might never enjoy.*

*Make me strong enough to lift this load.*

*Make me faithful enough to carry it 'til the day's end.*

*Make me wise enough not to carry tomorrow's load today. Amen."*

(drawn from Chaim Stern's reflection in, *Day by Day: Reflections on the Themes of Torah from Literature, Philosophy and Religious Thought*, edited by Chaim Stern, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1998, p. 349).

In the last year, each of you have been called upon to be strong enough, faithful enough and wise enough to lift, carry and leave – many loads. Each of you have had to preserve through so much – facing days when you wanted to quit and days which you really dreaded the arrival of a new morning.

You have experienced illnesses and surgeries and the loss of loved ones. In the midst of this, you have found yourselves physically cut off from the people and places that most comfort you and bring you peace – and you have prayed that you not be spiritually and emotionally severed from them as well. You have borne the pain of feeling of recovering alone and the burden of knowing your beloved ones died without you by their side.

You have lost jobs or found your hours or pay severely cut. You have witnessed the death of some of your dreams. You have felt the sting of loneliness and isolation as you found yourself caught in the vortex of being alone too often and venturing out in need of human contact.

You and your children have yearned for friends, family, playmates, classmates, grandparents and teachers, and you have found yourselves staying away and saying “we must stay safe and stay

healthy” and “let’s keep together while we are apart” – sometimes not even knowing what those words mean anymore. You have felt and seen the strains of mental health conditions for yourself and those you love most of all. You have cried silent tears of separation and longing.

You have found yourselves cluelessly “teaching” your children and grandchildren (in some cases) for hours at a time each day and months on end – and realized their real curriculum was love and their real teacher was you.

You have found yourselves turning into Zoom Zombies and Facetime Fanatics while talking, laughing, playing games and hanging out on all sorts of devices which have become our new appendages and our daily escapes into worlds which take us out of this one for an hour or longer each day. And you have missed movies, theatres, plays, playgrounds, ballparks and stadiums and all their people, and restaurants and even Chuckie Cheese, while TV has become your best friend (and worst enemy) and many books have opened your mind and spirit but not been able to fill the void of longing to be with dear friends and loved ones.

You have seen all four seasons of the year come and three of them go while trying to convince yourself “this too shall pass” but feeling at the core of your being isolation in ways you never imagined possible (unless, of course, you are loving this as you watch from a cloistered convent or monastery somewhere in the world today).

You and I have longed to be together in worship and friendship with God and one another. You have sent me wonderful pictures of you and the kids “in worship” in front of your screens in PJ’s

along with pancakes, children, cats and dogs. Keep them coming! I love them all! Meanwhile, Emily, Kevin, Mark, Peter and I have been here for 47 Sundays – preaching, praying, teaching, playing and singing to an empty room – believing in our deepest hearts that God is still speaking, that God is still listening and you are out there – listening and receiving and sharing and interacting with us in this virtual space we have come to know as home.

And by my best calculations – at least 50-75 of you have battled through COVID-19 and at least 20-30 of our loved ones have lost their battle to COVID-19. In each case, there are people whose stories I have yet to hear because you have persevered alone – too many days – apart from me and WE.

As a nation and world, we have all been called to face the worst planetary pandemic since 1918, witness and experience firsthand economic challenges that have wreaked havoc in a vast number of key sectors of our society, face (or ignored) the hard truths about racial inequities and injustices that our nation has buried and ignored in all too many ways by all too many people for 402 years. We have dealt with crises in housing and health care and a threat to democracy which is real and unresolved, all the while dealing with a growing global climate crisis which must be addressed now because later will be too late.

To preserve with all that is happening has taken skills, abilities, and agilities most of us never knew we had.

**And yet – You have persevered – through it all.**

But I think it's fair to say, you and I would have traded all our perseverance for the presence of people. We would gladly trade

our new found skills in perseverance for health and well-being, for peace that passes understanding and for economic and democratic (small D) unity and solvency.

Nevertheless (and our faith always dwells in the “nevertheless”), I am reminded by Charles R. Brown that persistent effort and perseverance drive us day to day. Brown writes:

*Is anything vital ever accomplished without persistent (and persevering) effort? Farmers plow and sow and keep on plowing and sowing. Miners dig, and keep on digging, deeper and deeper. Musicians practice and keep on practicing. Scholars study, and keep on studying. And so, must we too (pray) – if we would know how prayer purifies, fortifies, enriches the inner life, we would all persevere in prayer – continuously – day and night” (Ibid, p.352).*

**Perseverance doesn’t appear out of the vapor.** It comes from something within us that gives us newfound strength and courage in the face of despair and challenge. It comes from faith in God. It comes from faith in Jesus Christ. It comes from the Holy Spirit blowing into our lives. It comes from a deep desire to turn surviving into thriving. It comes from our DNA and our ancestors in faith and family who faced a lot harder things in a lot tougher times than anything we’ve seen– and they persevered. They found a way to fight through surviving to thrive.

As we step into this day and this 169th year as a congregation, I pray that God will strengthen us by faith. I pray that our Abolitionist ancestors will lift and carry you through their example of perseverance. Here at First Church, our ancestors built this Cathedral of Grace. They built this House of Justice, during the Great Depression 90 years ago. They had nothing and they built this. They felt that beauty needed to rise and shine in the heart of

darkness. They felt that their legacy would be this cathedral built from blood, sweat and tears. They showed us what it looks like to dream and to build out of depression and struggle.

So, what about us? What will we leave as our legacy? A hundred years from now, when people speak of the worst global pandemic in human history, what will be about this pulpit, about this house of prayer about you and about me? Will they say we faced this moment together with perseverance and faithfulness or will they say no one remembers what we said and did here in our time, in our city and in our nation's time of greatest challenge? Will they say, as followers of Jesus Christ, we rose and we found a way to move forward in faith – or will they say we faded and fell away like faithless followers of – “whatever?” Will they say we took on the challenges, hardships and injustice of our time, or will they say we stayed safe and hidden away until all the storms assailing us had passed by? Will they say we were great Stewards – that we used all the gifts that God had given us, that God had blessed us with or will they say we were greedy and just held on with little concern for our sisters and brothers in need?

What will they say we did and said in the Coronavirus Crisis and all its subsidiary crises? Will they say we did the right thing? Or will they say we did nothing at all?

Let it be said that we stood together while we were apart. Let it be said that we grew stronger in the face of all our real and dangerous challenges. Let it be said that we were great stewards of all the gifts that God blessed us with!

Let it be said that we did more than persevere. We did more than survive. We thrived.

**Persevere** only appears in the Bible once.

And in that one time, Paul uses the word very carefully. He calls on all followers of Jesus Christ in Ephesus and Columbus, then and now and for all time to persevere – NOT for ourselves – but for **ALL THE SAINTS OF GOD – all the saints of God** – living and dead. He wants the Ephesians of the First Century and the Christians of the 21st Century to rise in the Spirit, to follow Jesus and to pray unceasingly.

In the spirit of persevering for all the saints who have gone before and those with whom we walk this path, let us carry Paul's words into this new year in our life together: *“(My sisters and brothers), Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. And to that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.”* Amen.