



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Endurance, Character, and Hope

Text: Romans 5:1-8

June 15, 2008

Father's Day

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You might have listened to the words from Romans and wondered how this all fits into Father's Day.

Paul uses three words, linking them together; endurance, character, and hope. Often, in terms of Father's Day, it would seem that a great concept is to speak about fathers and character.

One could go the direction of fathers as characters; but Paul seems to be indicating that people ought to be of good character.

To be quite honest, I think that it's pretty risky business to preach a sermon on the subject of character. We all believe that character is important. We all believe that character is a virtue. We all expect people, especially people sitting in church, to be people of good character and preaching a sermon on character sounds like an obvious thing.

However, I always wrestle with that because all of us, if we are honest, have character flaws. So, I preach this sermon on character recognizing that I, like everyone else, am not a perfect representative of character. Only Jesus is that and he had another preaching engagement this morning...

Character, when we read the words of St. Paul, begins with endurance.

A second thing I want to look at is endurance. To endure is to be persistent, it is to hang in there, even when things become difficult.

George Danzig was a senior at Stanford University during the Depression. All the seniors knew they'd be joining unemployment lines when the class graduated. There was a slim chance that the top person in the class might get a teaching job. George was not at the head of his class, but he hoped that if he were able to achieve a perfect score on the final exam, he might be given a job.

He studied so hard for the exam that he arrived late to class. When he got to class, the others were already hard at work. He was embarrassed and just picked up his paper and slunk into his desk. He sat down and worked the eight problems on the test paper; then he started on the two written on the board. Try as he might, he couldn't solve either of them. He was devastated. Out of the ten

problems, he had missed two for sure. But just as he was about to hand in the paper, he took a chance and asked the professor if he could have a couple of days to work on the two he had missed. He was surprised when his professor agreed.

George rushed home and plunged into those equations with a vengeance. He spent hours and hours, but he could find the solution for only one of them. He never could solve the other. It was impossible. When he turned in the test, he knew he had lost all chance of a job. That was the darkest moment of his life.

The next morning a pounding on the door awakened George. It was his mathematics professor, very excited. "George! George!" he kept shouting, "You've made mathematics history!"

George didn't know what his professor was talking about. The professor explained. Before the exam, he had encouraged the class to keep trying in spite of setback and failure. "Don't be discouraged," he had counseled. "Remember, there are classic problems that no one can solve. Even Einstein was unable to unlock their secrets." He then wrote two of those problems on the blackboard. George had come to class late and missed those opening remarks. He didn't know the problems on the board were impossible to solve. He thought they were part of his exam and was determined that he could work them. And he solved one! He did the impossible.

That very morning the professor made George Danzig his assistant. He taught at Stanford until his retirement.

George Danzig was successful not just because he was brilliant but because he had the endurance to keep doing the job, to keep working, even when the odds were against him.

Endurance leads, according to Paul, to character.

There are lots of definitions of character and the one I most often think of is trying to do the right thing consistently, no matter what the circumstances. Sometimes the word we use to define this is the word righteous. Being righteous is trying to do the right thing all the time.

During the American Revolution, General George Washington began to have a complaint.

It seems that during the summer, when the weather was good and food was abundant for the soldiers, he had a full army. However, when the weather began to get cold, when winter began to set in and life became more rugged, many of the soldiers simply deserted. They went home.

Washington began to complain bitterly about the summer soldiers. They were there when the going was easy, but when things were difficult they simply gave up and went home.

Many people deal with God and faith like that. St Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy that the Gospel needed to be preached 'in season and out of season.' When people were ready and willing to listen—and when people didn't.

Being righteous is being willing to be obedient and faithful to God both in season and out of season. Being righteous is being the year round soldier, not just the summer soldier.

This is, as an aside, quite different from being self-righteous. Being self-righteous is believing that you are right all the time and the people who are around you who don't abide by your set of rules are bad or inferior. A truly righteous person understands the difference and does not judge others.

Endurance leads to character which leads to hope.

It is Father's Day, and there is a message in this process of endurance leading to character which, in turn, leads to hope.

People often wonder if there is any hope and often when they see an upcoming, younger generation, they wonder, indeed, if there is hope. This has been said:

The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up the best food at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.

Often, when people listen to those words, they nod their heads and say, "Yes, this is true." There is no hope.

The words are attributed to Socrates who lived from 469-399 B. C.

Somehow the world has survived since then and, I suspect that each generation has looked with wonderment on the upcoming generation and wondered just what was going to happen.

St. Paul gives us an insight.

Endurance leads to character. As long as we teach younger generations, and often teach ourselves, that endurance, hanging in there for the long haul, we will give everyone an opportunity to grow in character.

If in the learning of endurance, we learn that our goal is to live good, respectable, righteous lives, both in season and out of season, and be not only a people of the summer, but of the winter, spring, and fall as well, we pass on a legacy of good character.

And it is in building people of character that there is always hope for the next generation.

And hope never disappoints us.