



HOLD FAST

April 13, 2017, Maundy Thursday

Psalm 116

Rebekah M. Hutto, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Loving God, it was the beginning of salvation on that night long ago that you prepared your disciples for the events of these days. You endured the pain and isolation, betrayal and loneliness. As we sit with you tonight, and with each other, we ask that your Word, the story of your passion, be made fresh to all of us. Help us to endure with you as your great love for us unfolds. As we hear the words of Scripture, gather around your table, and journey with you to the cross, may your wisdom and love pour out upon us. Amen.

This last weekend our Scottish friends covered New York City in celebration. The annual Tartan Day parade, held at the beginning of April each year, celebrates Scottish clans from all over, and is filled with bagpipes, drums, and tartans of every color. As a McLeod myself, I learned from my father and grandfather our own Scottish history. In 2003 I was even able to travel to the McLeod castle for the Clan MacLeod Parliament. Set on the beautiful Isle of Skye, castle Dunvegan rises from the edge of an inlet on the lake. With the clan motto, *Hold Fast*, emblazoned on the crest, the McLeod castle is the oldest continuously inhabited castle in Scotland and has been the stronghold of the clan's chiefs for more than 800 years.

The story goes that the clan's motto *Hold Fast* comes from an encounter between a 14th century MacLeod chieftain and a wild bull. On a journey home, the chief found himself face to face with this bull and knew that he was in mortal danger. Nevertheless, he persevered, and after a struggle the chief was able to wrestle the bull to the ground. All the while he was cheered on by his clansmen. "Hold Fast MacLeod!" they shouted, "Hold Fast!"¹

¹ <http://www.dunvegancastle.com/your-visit/castle/the-motto/>.



These words “Hold Fast” convey a certain amount of grit, strength, and persistence needed to stay the course. *Holding fast* leads someone to endure and never let go—no matter what may come. As we gather for worship in these final days of Holy Week, the words “Hold Fast” take me to Jesus’ journey to the cross. Tonight, during the Tenebrae readings, we will hear how Jesus held fast in the garden, how he held fast while on trial, and, we will remember how Jesus held fast on the cross, even to the bitter end.

The strength to hold fast was engrained in the people of Israel, as evidenced by Hebrew scripture. The author of tonight’s Psalm has endured tremendous suffering; this is someone who has held fast, knowing that God has stood with him in his pain. In these words of thanksgiving that Shannon just read, the psalmist praises God who has heard his voice and offered protection. The writer knows what it is to hold fast to our God—the great deliverer—and in this Psalm he offers praise, knowing that God provides. One of the marks of faith is holding fast to God, even in the midst of pain, because God is the one in whom deliverance resides. This sentiment gets echoed in the New Testament, in Paul’s letter to the Romans. He urges the Christians in Rome—and us as well—to “hold fast to what is good.”²

One of my seminary classmates and friend, and to be honest one of my teachers, is Elise Erickson Barrett. In 2016, after years of illness and treatment, Elise lost her husband, Chris, to cancer. Elise and Chris were a young couple, parents to three beautiful children, and they had served together in ministry in the United Methodist Church. However, after Chris’s diagnosis, Elise began her new life as a caregiver to him as well as to their three children. Their journey continued through ups and downs, and in his final year, the year she calls her husband’s “dying year,” Elise received advice from a beloved seminary professor.³ Having been given good news, news that would extend his life a few more months, Elise uttered these

² Romans 12:9.

³ Barrett, Elise Erickson, *Dark Devotional: Enduring Unto Death*, August 2016, *Patheos* <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/sickpilgrim/2016/08/dark-devotional-enduring-unto-death/>. Elise is my constant teacher and friend, someone who knows the dark journey of Good Friday but continues to teach the Good News of Easter. I dedicate this sermon to her and our saint, her late husband and companion, Chris Barrett.



painful, honest words to her mentor: “It’s hard, even though the news seems good, it’s still hard.”

Our professor responded with love and compassion. Her reply to Elise speaks to where we are on this night, a night of holding fast. This is what she said to Elise,

“You know that nobody can make this easy or smooth for you; and pious platitudes won’t see you through the moments of despair either. All I know from my own life and its times of walking through the valley of the shadow of death is that, sometimes, our only calling is to endure. Nothing more, nothing less. I think it was Jesus’ last calling, on the cross: he endured. No alleluias, no sudden moments of redemption and bliss, no one coming to save his life — just enduring, moment by moment...”

So,” our professor continued, “you may have to find a place in yourself that accepts this basic calling, to endure. And it is a very basic, simple calling: you don’t need to do it prettily (in fact, you won’t) or joyfully or “faithfully.” All you have to do is: endure. Period. And if you think you cannot go on, find people who will help you endure.”⁴

Endurance. Holding fast. Faithful endurance is the calling of the Christian who chooses to sit through this dark night. As we sang when we began our worship: *Go to dark Gethsemane, ... Turn not from His griefs away,*⁵ tonight we walk with Jesus, through his betrayal and arrest. Tonight is a night that leads to our Savior’s death on Good Friday, and we are called to endure, to face the suffering and to walk with Jesus through it. We cannot explain these events away. We can’t offer trite clichés to make them easier to hear—we must endure. Through the stories, the anthems, and the pain of this night...we are called to endure the agony of our Savior’s death alongside him.

As Michael referenced on Sunday, an op-ed writer in *The New York Times* wrote two weeks ago, “For those of the Christian faith, God is a God of wounds, [for

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Go to Dark Gethsemane*, Author: James Montgomery (1825), Tune: REDHEAD.



those of the Christian faith] the road to redemption passes directly through suffering.”⁶ Although it may not be the most beautiful part of our Christian journey, many of us here know what it is to endure in our own lives. My friends, you too are enduring...through difficult diagnoses or the grief of losing a loved one. Some of you have been facing the journey of raising a child who brings pain and exhaustion, or you’re grieving the children you are unable to have. Some of you have been enduring and fighting the many injustices of this world without signs of hope. Others of you may be enduring, in the middle of the seemingly idyllic Upper East Side, the pain of living a life that doesn’t match the pretty picture we so often project. Let me be clear, God never intended the suffering we face. There are things in this world that we ought never have to endure. But when we’re honest about our faith, we know holding fast through the pain is a part of the journey. And it’s not a journey decked out in Easter bonnets and fancy suits. Endurance, on this night of holy waiting, is covered in a shroud of black. It is knowing that to follow Christ to the cross is an ugly path, one filled with pain and sorrow. Simply enduring is not the loveliest part of our lives, but it is often the most loving.

My friend Elise, someone who embraced her husband’s body until he took his last breath, reminds us that we are not alone in our enduring. She has written,

“Endurance on a cross is ugly...But perseverance was Jesus’ last gift to us. He endured. One breath, and then another, holding on until it was finished...”

Remember this, she says: the quiet, ugly, impossible act of enduring suffering is precisely how God chooses to redeem the world. It’s how love looks when it’s poured all the way out. Some wrongs, some injustices, some abuses we are [never] called to endure. But, there is suffering we are held to by the bonds of love and faithfulness, or just by simple circumstances. And even though it may look small and ugly, even though the cross is offensive to some and foolishness to others, Jesus’ endurance of it to his death rips open the curtain between heaven and earth and unleashes the transformative power of love in God’s broken, beloved world...

⁶ <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/03/25/opinion/sunday/after-great-pain-where-is-god.html>.



Keep your eyes on Jesus, she says. Endure. And know that you're not alone.⁷

Hold fast to what is good, the apostle Paul says. Sisters and Brothers, enduring in Christ receives its reward: God turned Jesus' endurance into resurrection. Jesus endures and then he, the living, breathing and resurrected Christ, has the last word. So we endure tonight with him; he endures with us. Our own endurance through pain is not suffering for suffering's sake; enduring in Christ's name will receive redemption.

My friends, Jesus is the one who knows what suffering is... but, he is also the one who refuses to let it defeat him ...or us.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Barrett, Elise Erikson, *Dark Devotional: Enduring Unto Death*, August 2016, *Patheos*
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/sickpilgrim/2016/08/dark-devotional-enduring-unto-death/>.