



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

July 24, 2016

“Grit”

(Genesis 18:20-33)

Rev. David K. Groth

*Genesis 18:20-33 (Abraham pleads for Sodom and
Gomorrah.)*

COLLECT: O Lord, let Your merciful ears be attentive to the prayers of Your servants, and by Your Word and spirit teach us how to pray that our petitions may be pleasing before You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Angela Duckworth is a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. She's spent the last decade studying why some people succeed and others don't. Is it because of innate, natural abilities? Or is it more because of tenacity and determination?

She studied the freshmen class of cadets at West Point. Every year, West Point enrolls more than 1,000 of the best and brightest as measured by test scores, high-school class rank, leadership potential and physical fitness. They turn all this into a composite score. And yet, 20% of cadets drop out before graduation, and many of those in the first weeks of intense training. So Duckworth set out to measure tenacity or determination. She created her own scale and calls it the "Grit Scale". It turns out this Grit Scale is much more successful at predicting who will make it through West Point than West Point's own composite score.

Applying her Grit Scale to other groups, she was able to predict who would do best in the national spelling bee contests, and who would sell the most as sales associates. She studied Ivy League undergraduates. Surprisingly, this showed the smarter the students were (as measured by SAT scores), the less gritty they were (WSJ-May 3, 2016).

Her conclusion? What drives success is not necessarily genius, but rather a combination of passion and perseverance working toward a long-term goal. This grit predicts success better than innate ability. Actor Will Smith is an example. He said, "The only thing that is distinctly different about me is: I'm not afraid to die on a treadmill . . . If we get on the treadmill together, [one of two things will happen]: you're getting off first . . . or I'm going to die."

Duckworth found a gritty individual doesn't need to have an obsessive infatuation with a goal; just consistency over time. "Enthusiasm is common" she says, "endurance is rare"

Question: Doesn't God's Word also hold up gritty people as examples for us?

I'm thinking of that Canaanite woman. Remember? She was desperately seeking help for her daughter. But Jesus was kind of rough with her. First he ignored her, which was unusual, but that wasn't enough to thwart her. So he said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." In other words, "I'm not here for Canaanites." She cried all the louder, "Lord, help me!" He answered, "It's not right! It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (Did a Jewish rabbi just call a Canaanite woman a dog?) Still, she hangs in there. She does not give up. She does not leave with a huff and a puff. No, this woman has grit. She will not be thwarted. She comes right back at him: "Yes, Lord" she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And Jesus loves her tenacity. "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (Mt. 15:21ff). He liked her gritty faith.

God holds up gritty people in the Bible for their nerve and their pluck. I'm thinking of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. When he heard Jesus was walking by, he began to cry out, "Jesus, have mercy on me!" Apparently, Bartimaeus' loud begging was quite inappropriate and disruptive because others quickly told him to shut up. But that just made him turn up the volume all the more. "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." Jesus liked his gritty faith.

We never see Jesus admiring a man or woman of great innate talents. We never see him heaping praise on a child prodigy, or a learned academic, or a highly acclaimed musician. Apparently he's not much impressed; he is the one, after all, who created them and endowed them with gifts and talents and interests. He is impressed, however, by

people who don't easily give up. In fact, he so likes tenacious faith that he even makes up a story about it (Luke 18:1ff).

It's a about a widow who wants justice from a judge. But there's a problem. The judge assigned to hear her case doesn't care about justice. He doesn't fear God or care about men. And as a widow in the first century she would be the easiest person to ignore. She has no influence or affluence, no leverage. But she has time, and determination, and a long term goal. And so she starts making the daily trip to demand justice from this judge. She is turned down again and again. But that doesn't thwart her. She figures she'll pester him until she gets what she wants. Of course, that's how it turns out. He's the one who relents. He's the one who caves in under her pressure. And the point is, if this old coot who neither fears God nor cares about men, gives this widow what she asks for, how much more so will the Lord our God, (who is just and loving) how much more so will he see to it that your prayers are answered.

But with this parable Jesus is also saying, "Sometimes it's going to seem to you that I'm like that old coot who doesn't care about you or anyone else. But don't you lose heart! Don't you give up! You hang in there with faith and tenacity and patience. I have a plan for you, and a plan for others, and I'm working it in ways that are good and right and just. So don't you give up! Get angry. Get sad. Pound your fists into your pillow, but don't turn your back on me."

God wants his people to be a gritty people. In our Old Testament lesson today, he holds up yet another example of grit. The Lord says to Abraham, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous, that I'm going to go down to see for myself how bad it is." Abraham suspects the Lord doesn't have just a fact finding mission in mind, for he already knows the facts. Abraham suspects the Lord has it in mind to wipe them out. But Abraham has family there in Sodom. His nephew Lot lives there, a good man, along with his wife, and children.

Family. Abraham plucks up his courage and makes a desperate bid to save them. “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you, Lord, to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked. Far be it from you!” (He’s gritty right from the start!)

The Lord answers him. “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

“What if the number is 45?”

“If I find forty-five there, I will not destroy it.”

“What if only forty righteous ones are found there?”

“For the sake of forty, I will not do it.”

“May the Lord not be angry. . . but what if only thirty can be found there?”

“I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

“Twenty?”

“For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”

“Let me ask just once more. . . Ten?”

“For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

Notice Abraham is respectful and humble, but also tenacious, and the Lord always likes that. He never shuts Abraham down, nor even hints at getting irritated.

If Abraham had had less faith, he might have blurted out, “I refuse to believe in a God who could allow such calamity to happen to innocent people.” And if Abraham had had less grit, he would have said, “Well, whatever the Lord wills, I’m sure it’s fine. Thy will be done.” As it is, Abraham has both faith and grit.

Christians without grit sometimes fall into that kind of fatalism, believing everything has been predetermined, already mapped out. Nothing can change. Nothing can be altered. And so we pray, “Thy will be done” and leave it at that. That wasn’t Abraham’s style, nor Bartimaeus’s, nor the Canaanite woman’s, nor the widow’s. That’s not what

impresses Jesus. Luther wrote, “Persistence does not offend God; it pleases him.”

Think of those saints of old, your family members who are long gone, but whose faith inspires you still. My guess is what impressed you most about their faith was not how meek and mild they were. You admired their faith for its tenacity and nerve. Heb. 12:1 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also . . . run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

We’ve talked a lot about how rapidly the culture around us has changed, really in just the last five/ten years. But this isn’t the time to roll over and submit to the culture. This is not the time to give up. God doesn’t need that. He needs his people to be a gritty people.

Gritty in our parenting: “Impress [these commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deut. 6:7).

But also gritty with our love: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt. 5:44).

Gritty with our forgiveness. How many times shall I forgive my brother? Up to seven times? “I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!” (Mt. 18:22).

God needs his people to be gritty today. “Do not be overcome by the world, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

Gritty in our marriages. “Go love your wife, Hosea, though she is beloved of another and is an adulteress, love her even as I the Lord your God love my people Israel, though they turn to other gods” (Hosea 3:1).

Gritty in our worship: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). It wasn’t a matter of convenience, or when they had nothing better to do. “They devoted themselves” to it.

Gritty in our study of God's Word. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16). Not just come for an occasional visit. Let it dwell within you. Marinate in it.

What the Lord needs from his people today is faith that is gritty.

Gritty in prayer: "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

Gritty in works of mercy. "Let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (2 Thess. 3:13).

Especially gritty in the faith. "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have laid hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize of God's heavenly calling in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).

Remember, what counts is not a flash in the pan sort of effort. What counts is consistency over time toward a long-term goal.

Is there anyone who embodies that more than the Lord our God? What is God's long term goal? He means to save us. How long has he been working on it? Since before the foundations of the world. How's his progress? Already done! He achieved salvation for you in Christ Jesus. Never did a man have more tenacity and resolve than Jesus when he turned toward Jerusalem and the suffering that awaited him there. Never was a man more gritty than the one on the cross dying for you, paying the full price of your sins, and not a penny short.

And it's his grit that counts the most, because there comes a time for each of us when we run out, when we have no more strength and tenacity or even will to live. There comes a day when we cannot bear yet another session of dialysis, or dose of chemo, or surgery . . . when we don't even have the strength to lift up an arm and take a pill, when we can no longer even breathe for ourselves.

When you've run clean out of grit, know this: he has plenty to spare, and he has plans for you to live a much better

life in a much better place. So death for us is little more than a threshold into life. Isaiah 40: “He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

One suspects there are challenging days ahead for Christians in America. We’ll certainly need the best and brightest to rise to the occasion. All those things that West Point looks for we’re also going to need in the church: people who are smart, and physically fit and respected as leaders. But perhaps more than anything, we’re all going to need to be his faithful and gritty people. And then, when the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed and fever of life is over and our work is done, then we’re going to need him to be gritty for us. And the promise is he will not disappoint. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. . . Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”