

“Running the Race”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 17, 2022

10th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Do you have any family photo albums at home? Do you ever look through the pages, remembering the people and events that helped shape your life?

There may be pictures taken long before you were born: grand-parents, aunts and uncles, and your parents before they were grown. Then there is that picture of you in your mother’s lap or the vacation photo with your father in the background. School pictures, then graduation; the wedding and the first baby pictures. Then the cycle has started all over again. We gather memories and recall the people who have stood by us in good times and in bad.

In last Sunday’s reading, we looked at the ancient picture of Abraham and Sarah, who trusted as God called them to an unknown land and faithfully awaited the promise of a child. Today, we hear of Moses and Samson, Gideon and Rahab among other people – named or not – who walked in faithfulness over the generations.

As we consider this remarkable family the author of Hebrew sketches, we discover two portraits of faith. One is full of images of triumph: conquering enemies, obtaining blessings, shutting the mouths of lions, even gaining victory over death. But the other portrait is filled with images of suffering: beatings, imprisonment, violence and death. From the outside, the pictures are radically different; impossible to reconcile. But the writer of Hebrews mixes these categories of success and failure because our lot in life is not a measure of our faithfulness.¹

Why should we look at this ancient album of faithfulness? Because, in looking, we learn more about who we are. We learn that we are not alone; that we are part of a family of faith with particular traits and characteristics.

We tend to think of faith in terms of what we may get out of it; or, maybe, even in terms of setting a good example for our children and family. But the author of Hebrews reminds us that faith is not the matter of a calculated cost/benefit analysis to

¹ Bryan J. Whitfield from *WorkingPreacher.com*

determine the best outcome. In the great chain of witnesses recounted here, some of them saw faith bring them victory; others found that their faith brought suffering. Perhaps, this is the reason why – in the midst of fairly intense difficulties of their own – the “Hebrews” found themselves questioning the value of faith.

Perhaps they made the mistake of thinking that faith would enable them escape from the hardships of life; maybe they thought it would secure God’s special favor for them and their loved ones, thinking that Christian faith guarantees happiness and success. Maybe they imagined their faith would make them superior to others. Perhaps they embraced the idea that they could enjoy the benefits of the kingdom of God right here and now – what we might call the original Prosperity Gospel.

But, instead of success, the believers that the author was encouraging found themselves struggling with opposition and hostility and even, at times, physical harm. They saw themselves in the middle of an endurance contest that left them exhausted, frustrated, and confused. Thus, they were asking themselves how they could hold on to faith amid such fierce opposition. It’s a question that remains relevant for us today. We experience the difficulty of maintaining faith in a culture that is obsessed with winning in a whole host of ways: being the biggest, the loudest, the most attractive and influential. And so, the answer that the author of Hebrews gives relates to our situation as well as theirs: the contest of faith requires a longer view than just *what’s in it for me?*

Throughout this letter to the Hebrews, the author encourages his audience to hold fast, to endure, to remain strong until the end. No matter what obstacles are faced, they – like their many ancestors – need to continue trusting God, to remain in faith.

So, we learn that faith endures. Faith trusts God’s promises even when circumstances call those promises into question. In the face of suffering, faith holds on and holds out because of the certainty of a future in which God has something better in store. Such are the lessons of family of faith photo album. We remember that we are not alone.

We remember our company, but we are also reminded of our contest. We have a race to run. We are not just tourists in this world, wandering from place to place, taking pictures, visiting landmarks, writing postcards, and then returning to the safety of home. We are runners in a race – and not a fifty-yard dash, but a marathon.

The author describes the challenge facing his audience as an *agon*, a struggle. This Greek word does have an athletic connotation, indicated by our English translation: “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” But this is not

the only possible meaning; it can also describe a contest or struggle, more generally. This *agon* is no easy jog; instead, it is something that will demand effort, it will require sacrifice. But they can find encouragement in their struggle by the great cloud of witnesses that surround them.²

Similar to the present-day Olympic event, ancient marathon races would conclude in a stadium. A final lap would be made in the presence of onlookers who cheered the runners on. In Hebrews, these are the saints of old described throughout chapter 11. They await our race's end with eager anticipation.

In essence, the author of Hebrews portrays the life of faith in every generation as a part of a great chain of witness. When we follow the example of those who have gone before us and run the contest of faith that is laid out for us, we are taking up and completing their work. So in part, we keep going because we believe what their lives were about was important enough for us to carry on. When we run our race of faith, we are completing what preceded us even as we prepare the way for future generations of witnesses.³

But what do we do if all that still does not seem like enough? What if, despite a cloud of witnesses, despite that cheering section, despite our perseverance and sacrifice, we do not know if we have the energy and will to keep going, whether we can put one foot in front of the other and hold out to the end?

The writer of Hebrews has – in this section – one final word of advice; there is one more photograph for us to see, the final and most important one of all: “Let us run the race that is set before us,” we are told, “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Pioneer comes from a particularly rich Greek word, *archegos*, which means the author, the beginner, the trailblazer who goes before us. Jesus is the impetus of faith, blazing a trail through all of humanity, tested along the way, yet finding joy at the end of suffering.

But, in the context of a race, the *archegos* is also the team captain. In the Greek games, the captain would run the race and then wait at the finish line to encourage teammates as they followed in his footsteps.

Still, Jesus is not simply the pioneer; he is also the perfecter, the one who fills in what we might lack, taking our incomplete faith and making it whole. So, at those moments when our knees are weak and our head is drooping, when we feel worn out along the journey of faith, as we wonder whether we can hold on any longer, we hear

² Christopher Holmes from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Alan Brehm, “Finishing Is Everything”

these words from Hebrews calling out to us. We remember our company, the witnesses to faith who have gone before us. We remember our contest, the long, often demanding race that is set before us. And above all, we remember our captain who already finished this race and beckons us to keep running until completion.

Hebrews is not valorizing any and all forms of human suffering – indeed, our Christian call is to help relieve the symptoms and systems that create human hardship and pain. Thus, we commit ourselves to feeding the hungry, healing the sick, sheltering the homeless and comforting the aggrieved. What our text does not do is question why hardship is a part of human life. It, instead, draws on Jesus' own example and simply assumes that such is that case. Life is difficult; and the Christian life is no exception. The key for the author is that faith discerns where real life is to be found, understands which values are true and which are false, and endures hardship in the face of divine promise.

For those of us who have determined to follow Christ's example, the life of faith can be challenging at the very least. Amid the struggles, we naturally wonder, *what's in it for us?* Part of what keeps us going is the memory of those influential people who have left a mark on us by their character, their sacrifice, their faithfulness. The best way to honor their memory is to take up their work and finish it by living out our faith despite all obstacles. And part of what keeps us going is that we have people in our lives about whom we care deeply and for whom we feel a special responsibility to help shape their lives. When we persevere and continue to run, we are setting an example for them. We are preparing them to take their place in the great chain of witnesses. Honoring the memory of those who have influenced us and passing that influence along to the next generation; those are two good reasons to make the effort of continuing – despite the obstacles – the life of faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.