

A Matter of Faith: Part 2

Laying Aside the Extra Weight

“...let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely...” Hebrews 12:1

Hebrews 11:29–12:3
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Dallas

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
August 22, 2010

A couple of quick comments about today's sermon title. Yes, this sermon will address the issue of faith. Yes, since this is “Part 2” it is right to assume that it is an extension of last Sunday's sermon, aptly entitled, “Part 1”. And no, “Laying aside the extra weight,” will not be referring to a faithful diet program. For those of you who weren't here last Sunday, or have slept since then, as I have, let's begin with a short recap.

Last week we explored what Christian faith is, and is not. We talked about 3 areas in particular: faith as trust; faith and doubt; and faith and understanding. We looked at how **biblical faith is not blind submission to church teachings or subscription to religious doctrines and practices.**

Faith, for most of us, is often on-again/off-again rather than a strong, once-and-for-all occurrence. Faith is not always being sure where we're going, but going anyway because we believe God is leading us. The story of Abraham and Sarah showed us that faith is often seen, therefore, as a life-long journey with God, yet a journey without maps. For some, faith can best be explained as a “confident wandering.” And faith, like God, is ultimately a mystery. **By its very nature faith doesn't mean the absence of doubt,** but in fact it necessarily includes an element of doubt. For if we were always 100% certain, we wouldn't need faith.

The author of the book of Hebrews defined faith as, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen.” Hope is a vital element of faith. For we can only be a faithful people when we are a hopeful people.

The author then goes on in Chapter 11 to give examples from the Old Testament family tree of faith, including: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Today's scripture lesson continues with more examples of biblical people of faith, including the faith exemplified in the lives of Moses, Joshua who walked around the walls of Jericho, and Rahab. The author then states that he doesn't have time to tell about the faithfulness of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, all of whom served as judges before the era of kings. Also mentioned are King David, the prophet and priest Samuel, and the other prophets, as well as many women of faith.

Did all these biblical folks lead perfect, sinless lives? Not by a long shot. Among those in that list of the faithful from Hebrews 11 were a coward, a bad parent, a liar, a murderer, an adulterer, and a prostitute. Together, we see a portrait of often just ordinary, flawed people who put their faith in God, and then put their faith into action.

Many also had another thing in common: their life of faithfulness to God was not without times of suffering and hardship.

Hebrews 11 offers two portraits of the life of faith. One portrait is filled with images of triumph: conquering enemies, obtaining promises, shutting the mouths of lions, even gaining victory over death. **But the other portrait is marked by suffering:** public mocking, imprisonment, beatings, stonings, homelessness, hiding in caves, and violence, and death.

The portrayal of these two portraits of the life of faith are problematic to many. After all, our culture says we are either successes or failures. We learn, however, that a life of faith is more often both/and, not either/or. The writer of Hebrews mixes the categories because **our lot in life is not a measure of our faithfulness.** The intermingled categories are a word of encouragement for struggling Christians – you and me. The mixing of suffering and triumph gives us a word of hope: **faithfulness shines both in suffering and in triumph, both in sorrow and in joy.** Both are descriptions of the life of trust in God.

To offer only examples of suffering faith could add to our discouragement; to offer only examples of victorious faith could produce feelings of guilt and self-doubt as well as unrealistic expectations. That is why both are presented, and we must locate ourselves among them. In the process, we learn that faith trusts God's promises even when the present calls those promises into question.

The author of Hebrew's then completes the his train of thought about our faithful ancestors and predecessors this way:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. -Hebrews 11:1

These verses are steeped in very rich metaphorical language and are very informative to the life of faith. I've always particularly liked the metaphor of calling those who have gone before us in the life of faith as being a "great a cloud of witnesses."

Witnesses to what? The author compares the life of faith to a race in which we are the runners. The Apostle Paul also used this common athletic metaphor. Those "witnesses" have finished their race and are there in the stands, so to speak, to cheer us on. In other words, their example is cited to inspire our ongoing faithfulness and perseverance in the race we run. This race, by the way, is not a short fifty-yard dash, but more like a long-distance marathon.

Presbyterian pastor in Versailles, Kentucky, Melissa Bane Sevier, writes, "Every child, every teen, every adult needs people to lift them with their cheers, to charge them up and enable them to continue the race, to tell them they can do it, and, when their legs are just too weary, to carry them along."

This is what it means to be a part of the "communion of saints," as stated in the Apostles' Creed. Melissa continues, "Every time we learn from another person of faith, we experience that communion. Every time we remember a life well lived in faith, we have that communion. Every time we gather together and check in with our friends [as we do here each Sunday], we experience communion of the saints."

All this talk about life being like a race does not mean, however, that we are in competition with others to cross the finish line first. It's not about winners and losers. It simply means that the life of faith is a life-long journey, a pursuit that requires our continual attention.

The metaphor comparing the life of faith to running a race is also helpful in that it brings attention to the fact that anything that weighs down or clings to a runner becomes a hindrance. Imagine running a marathon with a backpack filled with rocks.

The all-important questions this biblical author asks us to address, then, are simple – though not necessarily easy.

- **In your journey of life and faith, what is weighing you down, holding you back, tripping you up, burdening your efforts to live the life you have been called to live, and be the person you have been created to be?**
- What is it that you could cast aside to lighten your load?
- What are you clinging onto that makes your life more cumbersome?
- What would it take for you to lay aside and let go of these things?

This, of course is the personal application of this passage – questions each of us must answer for ourselves.

We must remember, however, that the author of Hebrews is addressing a congregation. Therefore, **we must ask ourselves, as College Hill Presbyterian Church, the same questions: Is there anything that is weighing us down?** Are we clinging onto anything that is holding us back? Is there anything that may be slowing us down or hindering our progress, or worse, making us ponder giving up the race? What would it take for us to lay aside and let go of these things? And how, in the process, do we find the steadfast endurance to persevere and carry on?

Thankfully, the author of Hebrews provides an answer. And although it seems almost too simplistic, we're told to "**look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.**" In my opinion, this is much more involved than what is often expressed in what may of us progressive types believe has become nothing more than a trite phrase: Keep your eyes on Jesus. What, exactly is that supposed to mean?

Rather, **this passage speaks strongly to the necessity of living our entire life centered in God – the God of love, grace, compassion, forgiveness, peace and justice that was revealed through the life and ministry of the historical Jesus.**

I want to close this sermon on faith with what may be a familiar saying to some.

When you come to the edge of all the light you know and are about to step off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing one of two things will happen: there will be something solid to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly.

I would like to amend that just a bit, however, to offer a third option. Reality shows us that sometimes we do simply fall flat on our face. It's times like that when other people of faith come along and help us up and get us back in the race. And at other times, we are the people who help others get back up.

These are encouraging words to remember as we lay aside that extra weight and sin that weighs us down and holds us back.

So with confidence, with trust – with faith – that God is with us and for us, let us proceed with perseverance in our journey of life and faith.

Amen.

Resources:

Fred Craddock, *New Interpreters' Bible*.

Melissa Bane Sevier, pastor of Versailles Presbyterian Church, Versailles, KY; *Running Team*, 2010.

Bryan J. Whitfield, Assistant Professor of Christianity, Mercer University, Macon, GA; commentary of Hebrews 11:29-12:2.