

“so great a cloud of witnesses...”
A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, August 18, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

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, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

Pray with me. Never failing God, help us to learn how to not fail you. Remind us of the cloud of witnesses who have occupied these pews for so long who teach us how to endure and carry on their legacy to those who will come after us. Teach us again that endurance is just another word for trusting you no matter what. Amen.

Last Sunday we heard verses from the first part of Chapter 11 of Hebrews: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” (Heb 11:1-3)

I talked about the idea that faith is not certainty, faith is not logical sense, faith is not proof, faith is not a guarantee – faith is a promise.

Faith is a promise that God will be with us, no matter what happens or doesn't happen, no matter whether we are sick or well, no matter whether we are young or old, no matter whether we live or die.

Our faith is God's promise that all will be well, later, if not sooner.

Our faith is God's promise that we can survive any tragedy, any loss, any disappointment because so many in our sacred history have done so before us.

Today we continue with our reading of the end of Chapter 11 and the first verses of Chapter 12 of Hebrews. If last time our theme was “what is faith?”, this

time our theme is endurance, or perseverance – the importance of understanding what that means, how it has been demonstrated by a great cloud of witnesses before us, and what we are to learn about endurance and perseverance as we go forward, some of us enduring difficulties we didn't think we could endure.

It seems to me what the author of Hebrews offers his hearers is hope that through their enduring *faith*, and faithful *enduring*, through their perseverance in all difficult circumstances, they will receive the best and final gift of life itself – which is life eternal in the presence of God.

Endurance – what is it? (get responses) My trusty computer thesaurus defines endurance as “the ability or power to bear prolonged exertion, pain, or hardship [as in, “He endured the ravages of cancer for so long.”]; an act or example of toleration of prolonged suffering or hardship [as in, “She endured the treatment of her abusive spouse for years before she got away.”]; or the survival or persistence of something despite the ravages of time [as in, “The people endured through the horrors of war that went on and on and on.”] Or to put the term more simply, endurance is “staying power, patience, survival, stamina, fortitude or continued existence.”

When we endure we exhibit the staying power we need for continued existence, now and forever more. We keep on, even when we think we can go no further. We keep on bearing burdens, we keep on feeling pain and loss, we go forward when we think there is nothing left within us to go another step.

Talk about a pep talk, a sermon to arouse one's sagging spirit, the author of Hebrews sites case after case of people in our sacred history who endured, and kept on enduring until they took their last breath. Even when they might have given up on the promise of God for good things to happen, they kept on holding on to that promise, that faith that carried them through this life and into the next, eternal life.

What a cloud of witnesses! We may not be familiar with all the people the author of Hebrews mentions in this passage. But those hearing the words for the first time most likely would have been familiar with these role models of faithful living. And it's important to remember, I think, that not all of those named were always good and upright in their living. They were flawed, like us. They made mistakes, like us. Sometimes their choices in life were downright immoral or unethical, perhaps like some of our choices. I'm pretty sure you've made mistakes because I've made them. Yet all those the author of Hebrews named received the promises of God anyway. They were worthy of receiving God's grace and goodness finally, in the end, when all hope of goodness in this life's journey seemed gone.

The author of Hebrews is a preacher of the finest kind – for he draws his hearers into a time beyond this moment, beyond this difficulty, beyond this time of

trial. He draws them into a time of peace and love with and through a trust and faith in the ultimate promises of God.

In our time, we have many examples, too, of people who have endured and then lost their lives.

The work and life of Mother Teresa, enduring great hardships to help those poorest of the poor around the world, always comes to mind for me when I think of people who have endured the most and given the most of themselves to others. There's a story of one account of Mother Teresa's that I believe is important to hear again, especially now with so much animosity and ill will surrounding people of different ethnic backgrounds trying to come to, and who already live in, the United States.

Mother Teresa wrote, "I had the most extraordinary experience of love of neighbor with a Hindu family. A gentleman came to our house and said: 'Mother Teresa, there is a family who have not eaten for so long. Do something.' So I took some rice and went there immediately. And I saw the children – their eyes shining with hunger. I don't know if you have ever seen hunger, but I have seen it very often. And the mother of the family took the rice I gave her and went out. When she came back, I asked her: 'Where did you go? What did you do?' And she gave me a very simple answer: 'They are hungry also.' What stuck me was that she knew – and who are they? a Muslim family – and she knew. [Mother Teresa continues], I didn't bring any more rice that evening because I wanted them, Hindus and Muslims, to enjoy the joy of sharing. But there were those children, radiating joy, sharing the joy and peace with their mother because she had the love to give until it hurts. And you see, this is where love begins – at home in the family. So, as the example of this family shows, God will never forget us and there is something you and I can always do. We can keep the joy of loving Jesus in our hearts, and share that joy with all we come in contact with. Let us make that one point – that no child will be unwanted, unloved, uncared for, or killed or thrown away. And give until it hurts – with a smile." (appears in *Prayers for the Common Good*, 1998, p. 108-109)

The "vitality committee" of this church is preparing to buy items for the teachers of the local elementary school to help them be the best teachers they can be in these challenging economic times. These teachers will be helping the children of this community in their classrooms learn how to share, and how to get along with one another.

The author of Hebrews calls his hearers to live lives of endurance, of hardship, of possibly not seeing the fruition of the promises of God in this lifetime, but in the next. Mother Teresa reminds us that in the midst of enduring much hunger and suffering there can be great joy and loving generosity.

Let the people say, "Amen."