

“To know the faith of the long distance runner and not the sprinter”

Hebrews 12:1-4

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Pastor Tom Williams

For a long while I never liked the book of Hebrews. And now I realize that feeling was based on ignorance as much as knowledge. In preparing for this sermon, I began to do some research regarding this book and found out much I really sort of like. This is a book whose unknown author was writing to an unknown audience at an unknown time. It's one of those books of the Bible which just seems to have appeared and no one is sure who wrote it or when. Now it seems to have been written sometime around 70 of the Common Era for some of its references are to things such as the second temple which was destroyed in the 70's of the Common Era. In addition, it seems to be addressed to an audience of believers none of whom would have been alive when Jesus or most of the disciples were.

Hebrews is a book which seeks to lay out the life which a believer ought to live. It's first ten chapters are a careful cataloguing of such behavior and then in chapter eleven it turns to a listing of those whose lives were exemplary in how they lived out their faith. The writer of Hebrews is looking to these pillars of the faith as they upon whom we build and from whom we ought to learn.

Now before we get too far into this and begin worshiping the persons named by the writer we need recall how each had clay feet! For example, Moses was really coward, Rahab was a whore, a prostitute, and we could find in each of these mentioned a part of their personal history which might cause us to wonder about God's calling them to do the great things they did. If we judge by their personal histories we might doubt their importance but if we recognize and celebrate how their faith enabled them to serve their communities we will then be able to understand the role they play in the building of the faith.

Examining the pericope we read today the writer is exhorting the hearers or readers to acknowledge that their faith is not created from whole cloth but is founded in the witness of those who came before and this cloud of witnesses ought offer hope and a foundation. But the writer reminds us that such faith is founded upon a recognition or belief in Jesus as not simply another in the long line of believers but as the one who offered a perfect vision of what it meant to embody God.

This message was probably written to a church community which had known persecution and tribulations. They were probably only spectators and not participants in such as the reading mentions that their difficulties had not caused them to shed blood! The sins of which they have been accused of finding so difficult to resist may have been the sin of paying tribute to the emperor rather than being imprisoned or killed. The scandal of the cross is its political nature. Crucifixion was the punishment for the most feared and hated of the criminals which for Rome

were those who refused to bow to the empire, resisted its power of taxation, its imposition of its religious imperialism.

The writer of Hebrews looks to the crucified one as not simply the founder of the faith but the one who dared live it out most fully, to be its perfecter. It is to this one we are called to look and, while surrounded by those who have gone before, it is also this one who offers the path which we ought follow. Implied is that just as those who came before us with this one exception, we will fail to fulfill the promise but the pioneer and perfecter remains with us. The promise is one of God's ongoing involvement with us and that our failure while assured will not block that involvement. And that cloud of witnesses reminds us of God's participation with humans whose lives were far from perfect.

So what does that mean for us? There are several things which might be drawn from this. First, and I'm sure you are tired of being reminded but this is a historical faith in which we are involved. One of the key parts of the Christian faith and the Presbyterian tradition is the tie to history. We celebrate today the lives of those members who have died in the past year. Now we do so not to make us feel sad but to celebrate the lives of these who served well this congregation and this community. While I knew few of them, I am sure that they were a disparate lot and served in disparate ways. And if we look close we'll find clay feet among them. But just as the writer of Hebrews offered forth the names of those whose feet were often clay but whose deeds were also noteworthy, we offer and remember these who served. God calls not saints but sinners, not people who sit in cloisters and pray but people whose live their faith in the historical moment. The joy and excitement of their memories is that these are the pillars upon which our faith is built.

Second, we need remember that faith is for the distance and not the sprint events. Our life is a series of changes which happen as we move through them. Our understanding of what it means to be ourselves changes as we age and move from birth to death. Faith is not a given which is unchanging. Faith is a foundation but it is one which changes for it is or ought be a foundation upon which we build our lives and the circumstances of those lives change. Therefore, how we live out our faith changes. In the coming months, we will considering how we can grow as a congregation. That may be the greatest challenge any Presbyterian congregation faces for it is something we are not good at. In considering growth we will be asked to consider how we might make changes in how we worship that it might be more attractive to people who are not here.

And lastly, we are part of a community and as such we are involved with the history of many people and as such need listen and learn from each other. Just as the recent elections offered as many analysis as there are analyzers, faith communities are places of disparate ideas, disparate interpretations and the most important thing we can do is listen to each other and learn from each other. One of the difficulties of being part of such a community is that it may seem that we never settle the questions, we never come to the conclusion of the journey and that is exactly right! The hope and joy of our faith is that regardless of the twists and turns we encounter, our

faith in God's presence continues. And the promise is that changes in how we express our faith and/or understand it are not a sign of its weakness but of its strength. The fear ought not be of change but of seeking a faith which met yesterday's circumstances and understandings. God's presence opens each of us to the possibilities of understanding and celebrating it in a way which is meaningful to each of us but that also means that our communal celebrations will be ones which will change as we do.