

August 29, 2004
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Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19, Hebrews 11:29-12:2

“Looking to Jesus”

Soon after our graduation from Seminary, Bunny and I began our ministry as the pastors of two small churches in eastern North Carolina. We worked with the Session in scheduling the service of ordination and installation for about six weeks after our arrival. Family and friends were coming from all over to be with us for the service. On the Thursday morning before the ordination service, we were totally stunned to hear the news that my father had died. For a number of years, he had been ill and had faced serious physical limitations. Still it was a shock. Everything becomes a haze. We stumbled through that day as best we could. We made plans for the memorial service, packed and prepared to leave town to be with my family.

During those hours we found ourselves surrounded by the members of our new churches. We were just getting to know each other. They cared for us, prayed for us and even pressed money in my hand. We didn't know what to do about the ordination service that was scheduled for that weekend. My family encouraged us to go ahead with the plans for the ordination. They felt that it was what my dad would have wanted us to do. So we planned to return late Saturday in time for the service on Sunday. There was an added problem: we had planned to spend the next few days cleaning the house, cutting the grass, preparing the food and getting ready for the service. The members of our new churches told us not to worry. They assured us that they would take care of everything. At that point, what could we do but leave town and hope for the best?

We were exhausted when we returned several days later. We drove up to the house; the yard was beautiful, the house was immaculate, the refrigerator and counters were loaded with food and every meal was planned for our out of town friends. They had done everything they had said they would do and far more. I will never forget their kindness. It may not sound like much to you, but to me they were a part of that great cloud of witnesses who surround us with their love and encourage us with their faithful service. If the author of Hebrews had known them, he would have added them to the “roll call” of the saints who have lived by faith—Abraham, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel... Betty, Buddy, Needham, Dorothy, Sallie, Tom, Frances and Meg.

At the close of today's worship, we will sing a favorite children's hymn that tells of the saints of God “who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.” In its quaint English way, the hymn names these saints as a doctor, a queen, a shepherdess, a soldier, a priest and a victim of fierce wild beasts. The hymn celebrates the truth that the saints of God can be found anywhere and everywhere. The saints are “just folk” like you and me.

What makes a saint is neither a pious expression nor a “holier than thou” attitude. What makes people into saints is that they keep their eyes on Jesus. Some time ago I heard a minister tell about a Sunday kindergarten class that took a tour of the sanctuary as a part of their Sunday school lesson. The sanctuary had beautiful stained glass windows peopled with the great characters of the Bible and the history of the church. The teacher carefully explained to the children that the men and women represented in the stained glass windows were the saints of the church. Later that morning in worship, when the pastor gathered the children in the front of the sanctuary for the children’s time, he asked them if they know what a saint was. “Oh, yes,” cried one child, “they are the ones the light shines through.” The saints are those around us through whom we see the light of Christ shining through.

The author of Hebrews says that we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses. The last name the author inscribes in the roll call of the faithful is Jesus. The author says that we are to look to Jesus, who is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Jesus is the pioneer because he has blazed the trail for us. He has shown us the pattern of a faithful life. Out of his great love for the world, he “endured the cross and disregarded its shame.” He endured the scandal of the cross and the scorn of the public. He kept his eyes on God in order to accomplish God’s will.

Several weeks ago in a reading from Hebrews, we noted that “to perfect” means “to complete or to finish.” Jesus is the perfecter of our faith because he has accomplished his mission, finished his task so that we might follow in his footsteps. He lifts us up so that we do not stumble; he completes our faltering steps; he keeps us on the right path. He does not call us to go anywhere he has not already gone or to do anything he has not already done. He is always ahead of us encouraging us forward. Jesus has prepared a place for us with him before the throne of God.

The author of Hebrews is calling us to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” We are to let go of everything that slows us down or hinders our progress. Sometimes we get discouraged. The forces around us may lead us to lose hope. When the 80th Psalm was written, the people of Israel were in exile. The Babylonians had destroyed the Temple. The people were desperate and wondered why God didn’t hear their lament. They cried out:

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
Let your face shine, that we may be saved.

It would be a long time before the opportunity came for the people to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple. Their faith in God kept the fires of hope burning. They kept their eyes on the goal even when it was far beyond what their eyes could see.

We are called to be faithful to the end. The cornerstone of the church I served in South Carolina was laid in 1929. It was a year of great hope and great expectations for the future. No one who participated in the ground-breaking ceremony could have

foreseen the stock market crash that happened later that year. No one could have foreseen the depression that would engulf the country. Yet, those who established that church and built that sanctuary were faithful to the end. They completed their task with great love and at great personal sacrifice. They kept their eyes on Jesus.

We run the race with perseverance by keeping our eyes on Jesus. Even when we cannot see the finish line, we can see Jesus. Sometimes the things that slow us down or cause us to stumble are the things within us. One of the youth from my former congregation served as a youth director at another Presbyterian Church in the same city. He loved youth ministry, but he was afraid to go to seminary. He kept putting off the decision to go to seminary. Gradually, he began to discern a call to the ordained ministry. He went before the Session of our congregation to begin the process of becoming a candidate for the ministry. He told the elders that one of the reasons he had hesitated so long in making the decision was that he was not good in languages. He was afraid he would fail in school and let the church down. An elder who had known this young man all of his life said, "All we ask of you is that you follow your calling. The only way you can fail is if you don't try."

We find the strength to witness by keeping our eyes on Jesus. Times of trouble are the very times in which Christians often make the boldest witness. In such times, God gives us the Holy Spirit to encourage our faith and to guide our race. We do not have to rely on our own wisdom or strength. Jesus wants us to rely on his Spirit who is with us in our difficulties. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses and we have Jesus behind and before us as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Over ten years ago, not long after I became the pastor of my former congregation, one of the great leaders of the church, a woman named Sarah, was diagnosed with AIDS. She had contracted the HIV virus some years before through a blood transfusion. As her health failed, she knew the time had come to tell her friends in the church about her illness. This was in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, when the public knew little and feared much about AIDS. The congregation gathered on a Wednesday evening for supper and for what many thought would be a program by two physicians about this new epidemic called AIDS. Sarah's physicians spoke that night. One of them said that the AIDS epidemic calls the church to demonstrate the classical virtue of courage and the Christian virtue of compassion. He said that he could have come at any time to talk about AIDS, but he had come to help the congregation understand Sarah's story and her battle with the disease. When she got up to speak, the whole congregation rose to its feet and welcomed her with—I know it sounds strange—thunderous applause.

Sarah shared her story with the congregation. She spoke of the gratitude she felt for the extra years she had been given through the transfusion. Without the blood she would have died during surgery. Then she said something I will never forget. She had received a letter from a young friend who had grown up in that same church who now taught theology in another state. He told her that in the early church, the sick, the infirm, and the elderly were asked to come to the front of the church. They came and

sat in the front not so people could pray for them, but that their example of faithfulness in adversity would inspire the young. "Sarah," he wrote, "it is your time to sit in the front of the church."

Where in your life are you struggling to run the race set before you? Where are you struggling to keep your eyes on Jesus? Perhaps it is in a relationship with a friend, in the depths of your grief, in your struggle for health, in your search for work, in a problem in your marriage, in coming to grips with failure, or in wrestling with a powerful addiction or temptation. I do not know. Yet, I do know this: all around us are the saints of God, men, women, youth and children of faith, whose lives inspire us and who encourage us. They teach us how to hope, to forgive, to love, to have courage, to work for peace and to show mercy. There are those who "sit in the front of the church" so that we might run the race with perseverance. They help us keep our eyes on Jesus who has run this race. He is behind us and before us so that we may be faithful to the end.