



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Running the Christian Race by Jill Kayser

Sunday 14th August, 2022

Hebrews 11: 29 – 40, 12: 1-2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Our reading this morning comes from Paul's letter to the Hebrews in which he seeks to inspire the early Christians with the example of some faithful heroes from Israel's history – people who while not models of virtue by any stroke of the imagination, put their trust in an unseen God and bravely progressed toward goals that they were never able to fully realise. Having gone through the list of heroes, Paul finishes with Jesus, citing Him as the supreme example of faithful endurance and the one Paul reminds his readers to keep their focus on as they strive to live out their own faith.

The last part of our reading from Hebrews 12:1 *Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us* has been described as a summary of the Christian journey.

Renowned author, professor, theologian and interpreter of the Bible William Barclay, suggests that this passage is, "*One of the great, moving passages of the New Testament; in which the writer gives us a perfect summary of the Christian life.*"

This passage, Barclay suggests, sets out goals for those of us committed to being a Christian, provides inspiration for us to reach the goal, identifies the barriers to attaining the goal, and gives us suggestions for overcoming the barriers.

Our goal as Christians is to attain the likeness of Christ. Or if that sounds a bit too lofty, our goal is to be more like Jesus in our world so others will know of His love through us.

Our journey, or the race that is set before us, Paul suggests, is to move from our own self-centeredness to becoming more and more Christ-like each and every day. He assures his readers that despite beginning our human journey self-centered, when we commit to following Jesus and serving others, we evolve and become more like Christ ourselves.

And what of our inspiration to attain the goal? Paul reminds us of a great cloud of witnesses, which surrounds us on every side reminding us that we are not alone on this journey. We can't do it by ourselves nor are we expected to.

Take a moment to remember the faithful Christians, mentors and teachers who have shared their faith journeys with you. Some may be famous and others will only be known to you. How have their stories and examples encouraged, equipped and sustained you in your journey?

Two that come to mind for me on my own faith journey are my school teacher from year 4, Sister Judith who answered my question "where is God?" with such simple clarity and certainty that it led me to following Jesus at the age of 8 and continues to form and inform me 54 years later.

Another faith mentor for me was my childhood neighbour Auntie Lorna who always made time to chew the fat with me on all things God related. She invited me to teach Sunday School with her at the age of 14 and never failed to provide me with believable answers and consistent encouragement.

Of course there have been many others who have influenced and informed my faith journey. Authors like Father Richard Rohr, Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, John Spong, John Philip Newell. Activists and peacemakers like Oscar Romero, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and Mother Teresa.

Despite the encouragement we receive and the many heroes who inspire us, I'm sure you'll agree, the Christian journey is not easy. As we run this race we face many barriers and obstacles along the way.

We live in a world dominated by a "me first" attitude and many around us view Christians as an oddity and have no concept of servanthood or sacrifice. We often feel fear and assume scarcity, rather than celebrating the love and abundance of God.

As the world around us provides diversions, distractions and detours, we need to be steadfast in our commitment to follow the way of Jesus.

Paul urges us to "*Lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which entangles us.*"

Possibly the greatest barrier or encumbrance to running this race is ourselves. Too often we lack faith or see it as something that we can compartmentalise. We desire to be in control, even sometimes believing that we are in control.

Martin Luther describes this human propensity as sin stating: "*The sin underneath all our sins is to trust the lie of the serpent that we cannot trust the love and grace of Christ and must take matters into our own hands.*"

Below I share a poem written by a wonderful poet I have discovered recently called John Roedel that reflects on this human propensity to think we are in control: Have a look at it.

Our sinful and egoic nature can lead us to covet what we have - forgetting that everything we have - the abundance of life itself - comes from God and therefore should be shared willingly and graciously.

We put our own needs first and are victims of our EGO's. E.G.O. - an acronym suggests renowned author and teacher Wayne Dyer as "Edging God Out." When we edge God out, we get side tracked, we lose sight of the goal, or we forget the goal altogether. This sin is yet another barrier to running the good race and to experiencing and contributing to God's Kingdom on earth.

In his letter to the Hebrews, Paul suggests the means to overcome these barriers, is our endurance and determination to run the race set before us. He suggests that if we keep running with our eyes focussed on Jesus and submitting to the Holy Spirit, we will stay on course.

Endurance - that steady determination to keep going, even when everything tells you to slow down or give up. Paul Kayser shared some of his experiences of endurance with us when he took his seat "on the couch" this morning...

His aching muscles and resistant mind threatened to overcome him as he ran his marathon. But the weeks and months of training he had done to build up his fitness, and practise the distance, carried him past the tempting thoughts of quitting. And much of his inspiration to keep going came from those watching from the sidelines, offering him encouragement and refreshment - his "cloud of witnesses" - contributed to him completing the race.

He also spoke of the challenges and trials of military training and learning that working together can enhance endurance and achieve impossible goals.

Our steadfast endurance, provided by the example of Jesus Christ, encouraged by our mentors and teachers and sustained by the great cloud of witnesses, keeps us focused on the goal and enables us to persevere.

Jesus is both the goal of our journey and our companion, teacher and sustainer along the way.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who help us understand Jesus' message and His call on our lives.

But let's not forget that we, too, are part of that great cloud of witnesses. Our goal is not just to run this Christian race better, but also to be encouraging "heroes" to others – to be examples of what it means to be made and live in the image and likeness of God.

Let's accept God's gift of the Holy Spirit and know with absolute certainty that we are bearers of God to the world with every breath we take and every action we make.

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer, perfecter, sustainer and example of our faith. Amen.

So you want to be in control?

Me: Hey God.

God: Hello, My love.

Me: It's like being on a runaway train! I need to feel like I am in control of my life.

God: You want to be in control?

Me: Yes!

God: My beloved, You are living on a spinning wet rock of a planet that resides next to a constantly exploding fireball in the middle of an ever-expanding universe that is filled with mysteries beyond your wildest imagination.

Me: Um, okay....

God: And on this planet that you are hurtling through the great expanse in - you are coexisting with billions of other people who have free-will and their own experiences that shape their perspectives and beliefs.

Me: Yeah...?

God: And while all this is going on your soul is residing in a physical body that is such a miracle of delicate engineering that at any given moment could produce its last heartbeat.

Me: Right...

God: What is it about your existence that you think you have any control of?

Me: Um...

God: Come on - you know the answer to this. What can you control?

Me: How kind I am to people? How much I love?

God: Yep and one other thing.

Me: What's that?

God: How kind you are to yourself. And how much you love yourself. Aside from that - most of everything else is a bit outside of your design.

Me: That's a bit terrifying...

God: All great adventures are! ~ John Roedel