

Hebrews 13: 1-8 "Imitating Faith" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/9/19

It was called the intergenerational tennis match of the ages as 23 Grand Slam winner of Serena Williams was pitted against a lifetime admirer, 19 year old Canadian Bianca Andreescu. Bianca wasn't even born the first time Serena won a Grand Slam. The last time this, shall we say, this elder tennis powerhouse played the teenager, Serena's back got injured and Bianca knelt at her feet comforting and praising her for what she does on the court. Serena has transformed the tennis world for both men and women and now Bianca is doing the same. Williams spoke of her opponent recently saying, "She mixes things up. You never know what is going to come from her. She serves well, moves well, has a ton of power (and) is very exciting to watch. I think it is great for women's tennis." An amazing affirmation from a maestro who has paved the way for so many women tennis players.

In every profession, in every life, the words of our author today spark memories of those who have paved the way for us. "Remember your leaders...consider the outcome of their way of living, and imitate...". The Message version of the Bible phrases it this way, "Take a good look at the way they live, and let their faithfulness instruct you, as well as their truthfulness. There should be a consistency that runs through us all." Who has been this in your life- who do you remember that spoke the word of God to you? I invite you in these moments to turn to someone nearby or simply speak their name out loud in this place – let this space fill up with their names, maybe more than one. (pause) In chapter 12 of Hebrews, it says "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us 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...". For me, besides my parents, it was Mrs. Welch, my Sunday School teacher in Wichita, KS, who incidentally I discovered is Leanne Stump's mom;

Leanne being our Northern California Regional Camp and Conference Chairperson and wife to Don Stump, CEO of Christian Church Homes, who will hopefully be building low income senior housing for us. And I am reminded once more of that sacred bond that often brings us back full circle from where we began, despite the uncertainties, frustrations, and uncharted paths we experience. I remember Dr. Monza Naff and David Waggoner who counseled me through many emotional crises in my college years, Dr. Joey Jeter who made scripture come alive in seminary and planted a seed for preaching in us women as much as the men, and then there are so many of you in the churches I served who I consider the “outcome” of your way of life. I recall the integrity of each one of you; you are not perfect people, but everyone who knows you, senses your commitment to living the word of God that they speak. Remembering your and their witness, I try to do what Hebrews says: I find new strength to maintain my faith and witness, to run the race imitating their faith, even when I don't feel it down deep, trusting that if I keep persevering then that assurance and peace will come in time.

However, I will tell you honestly that it is hard work. This is because it is far too easy to forget the significance of these witnesses, to discount myself in comparison to these powerhouses, to grow discouraged, convincing myself I can never do what they do. People who dare to tell me just to have faith somehow make it worse. It is in these moments that we need the rest of our text: “Let mutual love continue...show hospitality...remember those who are imprisoned and tortured... honor the commitment of marriage... keep your lives free from the love of money... and be content with what you have.” In other words, even if you don't feel it, act it and keep acting it until it sinks deep into the marrow of your bones, the vessels of your heart, your very soul. Our book study this fall, *The Universal Christ*, offers a wonderful story

this week about Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman killed in 1943 at Auschwitz. She was a Dutch author and mystic, in the ways that Bruce Epperly taught us to understand mystics. Her diaries recorded the increasing anti-Jewish measures imposed by the occupying German army, and the growing uncertainty about the fate of fellow Jews who had been deported by them. Her diaries not only became a historical guide to the oppression, they described her spiritual development and a deepening faith in God in the midst of the Nazi terror. It was during the time she was voluntarily employed via the Jewish Council at a Westerbork concentration camp that she wrote, "The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down for a chat, the sun is shining on my face – and right before our eyes, mass murder... The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension." With great tenderness, empathy, and realization, she notes that it is not God's fault that things go awry, the cause lies in ourselves. It is our responsibility to help God and defend God's dwelling place inside of us to the last. Etty was offered a hiding place when it became apparent she and her family were to be deported to Poland, but she declined in order to stay with her family. It was 76 years ago yesterday, September 7, 1943, and just a few months before her murder, that Etty threw a postcard with her final words out a train which was recovered by Dutch farmers. It said, "Opening the Bible at random I find this: 'The Lord is my high tower'. I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother, and sister are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. We left the camp singing. Thank you for your kindness and care." The Lord is my high tower, she writes, much as Hebrews says with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" In the

end, she was what is referred to as an anonymous Christian, one who reflects Christ far more than many of those who profess Christ.

What ETTY experienced in her life was transformative, it evolved over time into a reflection of the God who lived inside her, you, me, and all those folks named in this space and beyond. She admired God's ways and therefore began to resemble those ways. Gray Temple says it works like this: "You come to resemble what you admire. People who admire money can get green and crinkly. People who admire computers can grow user-unfriendly. People who admire childish over childlike actions can get juvenile. It all depends on the power you surrender to it. People who actively and deliberately admire Christ come to resemble Christ as Christ was, remains today, and will carry on from age to age: generous, joy-filled, tender, fierce, courageous, and even a bit mischievous, fully open to others, and loving above all else." To resemble the Holy One within both us and creation starts out with mutual love above all else. Love, according to Rohr, is a universal language and underlying energy that keeps showing itself despite humanity's best efforts to resist it. We all know positive flow when we see it, and we know resistance and coldness when we feel it. Through all of life, love is constantly creating future possibilities for the good of all concerned – even, and especially, when things go wrong.

Mutual love is what allows us to discover how to be spiritually satisfied over materially satisfied, something which is far more lasting and doesn't fade once it is received. As Richard Rohr notes, "spiritual satisfactions feed on themselves, grow by themselves, create wholeness, and are finally their own reward." To be spiritually satisfied over materially satisfied is what Hebrews means by "being content with what you have." "Material satisfactions, while surely not bad, have a tendency to become addictive, because instead of making you whole, they

repeatedly remind you of how incomplete, needy, and empty you are. As alcoholics often say, your 'addiction makes you need more and more of what is not working.'"

Which brings us back full circle to that hard work of trying to have faith, too often a glib response when anyone feels discouraged or disheartened in life. The error in telling someone to just have faith is that they are using it as a noun rather than a verb. Faith is more a process than a possession. It is an "on-again-off-again" rather than "once-and-for-all." Faith is not being sure where you are going, but going anyway. It is taking a journey without maps, where doubts and questions are an integral part of the terrain. Faith is action-oriented as much as it is acting that it matters. And eventually in time, it will matter. We just need to remember the outcome of the lives of our leaders, those who have paved the way before us, to recognize it is true.