**Keep Focused on Jesus**

November 3, 2024

Hebrews 11:29-40; 12: 1-2 Russell Mitchell-Walker

I’m not much of a racer. Although Brian would say I love going fast when I drive! (especially the new car which can go fast very quickly and smoothly). But I have never been in races like running much, except at school, and there I don’t think I ever won or even got a ribbon, except those participant ones. Some people love racing, and whether it’s the 100m dash, a marathon or a triathlon, it is often exhilarating to finish and work to improve on your personal best. Winning is not often the focus, especially in the longer races, and particularly in races like the Ironman that involves grueling swimming, cycling and running, just finishing can be a major achievement. Finishing is it’s own reward.

That seems to be the message of the Hebrews passage today. Running the race with perseverance is named in Hebrews 12, drawing on the cloud of witnesses gone before us for inspiration and support. The community of the Hebrews were being persecuted severely for being followers of Jesus and so Paul, in writing this letter is encouraging them to hang in there and remember all the people of faith who have gone before them and finished the race. Their reward was great, having been faithful, they are blessed by and with God. They and we are called to keep focused on Jesus as we go through life and it’s challenges. We are to be inspired by these faithful witnesses, not to follow them, but to follow Jesus. Some of the faithful witnesses we heard about today are from stories we are more familiar with like the Israelites fleeing slavery or Joshua bringing down the walls of Jericho, but also some others we may not have heard as much about like Rahab, Gideon and Barak. And they may seem odd heroes by some standards. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who protected the spies Joshua sent, having heard about the God of Israel and wanting to follow this God. Gideon was a prophet named in the book of Judges and an altogether reluctant warrior. He was not confident in his own ability and he asked for proof that it was even the Lord talking to him at all. Barak refused to go to battle without Deborah at his side, and while to our present thinking there is nothing wrong with that, it must have been unusual in that time. More than that, for all of his willingness to put his life on the line, he was told up front that in the end the honor would go to another --- and in this case another woman. These imperfect heroes are held up as faithful saints, examples of perseverance and faithful followers. What is important in this passage is their faithfulness and Pauls’ emphasis on following Jesus - for us to look to Jesus as we seek to persevere, who is the pioneer and perfector of our faith.

The importance of keeping focused on Jesus, and following his ways and example and not the ones we may see as a hero can be evidenced by what we are witnessing in the US election. Many Christians are following a leader and seem to be forgetting the ways of Jesus, as they ignore the lies, criminality, racism, sexism, hate, and general lack of compassion he displays. Regardless of who we support, it is important that we hold on to our values as Christians, and follow the ways of Jesus, regardless of what our leaders might say or do. These Christian values should also guide us in discerning who to vote for.

These great cloud of witnesses referred to in Hebrews 12, are a reminder of those who have gone before us, not only in biblical times or in history but also more recently. We might think of recent heroes of faith in people like Martin Luther King Jr, civil rights activist; Bishop Desmond Tutu, defender of black South African rights and antagonist of Apartheid; and Ghandi, who fought for the rights of those in India and against colonialism. All of these people were committed to non-violent resistance of the systems of oppression and followed the example of Jesus. Even Ghandi who was Hindu, upheld Jesus as a good example for love and justice.

The great cloud of witnesses includes those we know in our lives who have passed. Who are your saints or heroes in your lives, in your community? I think of some of the saints here at Eastside that have died in recent years. Debbie Menz, who always helped with the crafts for Messy Church. Linda Fowler who among other things always helped in the kitchen for the Community Dinner and with Indigenous Christian Fellowship as well as with Messy Church. I could always count on Barry Adamko helping with the set up for our Community Dinner when I needed. Over the years Dale Banks helped a lot at Lumsden Beach Camp and was a strong supporter of the camp and of the church. Who do you think of in our community, in your life?

There are many living saints as well. Those who tirelessly contribute to the mission and ministry of the church and community. They are examples to us of Jesus’ love and compassion, his commitment to justice and peace. We see and experience these witnesses every day and even though they may not be perfect they inspire us to follow Jesus, and persevere in and through the challenges of life. May we keep our eyes focussed on Jesus as we run this race of life. Encouraged by the faithful who have gone before us, following his example of living a life of compassion and love, as we seek justice and peace in our lives, our community, and the world.