

Sermon, St. David's, August 14, 2022, Hebrews 11:29-12:2 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

What we call the letter to the Hebrews is really a sermon. In last Sunday's installment, the preacher started to talk about faith, specifically the faith of Abraham. In verses afterwards that we didn't hear, he preached about Moses. Today we get some other examples, but they're much shorter. The list of names we hear don't offer the dark side of faith.

Take Samson, for example, from the biblical book of Judges, who is mentioned in today's list. If you prayer Morning Prayer daily, you will have read snippets from Samson's story this past week that most of us didn't learn in Sunday School. I didn't, anyway. I heard about Samson and Delilah in Sunday School, but not the awful take about Samson's poor Philistine wife or about him tying foxes tail to tail with torches to burn crops.

Samson doesn't sound likable in many biblical stories, and neither do some of the others mentioned here. Like King David. David did a lot of bad stuff, particularly if we read the Kings stories instead of the Chronicles stories, which clean up his act a lot. But Samson and David and all of those listed here were faithful and beloved by God.

Faith, you all heard last week in Hebrews, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Being faithful, we hear today, does not mean that we will receive all of God's promises before death. Still, the preacher who wrote Hebrews implores us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

This line about running with perseverance the race has come to mean more to me in recent years. Almost five years ago, Caroline Peters, a marathon runner who then served as our fellowship vestry liaison, asked me if she could organize a "Pew to 5K." I said sure, so she set it up to start in February 2018 to take advantage of people's interest in their health at the beginning of the year after they set New Year's resolutions. I showed up to the first Saturday training to take pictures and to show support to her, because I was skeptical about the whole thing. Running and health were passions for Caroline, so she was using her gifts to serve God and as her pastor I didn't want to tell her that I doubted it would work.

I was wrong. Twenty-six people showed up on that first freezing February morning to train, and a month later, sixteen of them participated in a 5K. The following year, thirty saints of St. David's participated in a 5K benefitting the SPCA, and that time I was with them, because I figured a rector needed to show up for something that size.

I learned so much from that experience and three subsequent 5Ks I participated in that had ramifications for my spiritual life—for example, hammering home the importance of community. Dana Blackman ran with me the first time I raced, and I know I went faster and pushed myself more having this much younger woman at my side, while watching others older than we were pass us by. Dana probably could have kept up with them, but I could not have. I see them and everyone who participated as part of the great cloud of witnesses Hebrews mentions, as well as volunteers and passers-by who were not racing but took photos or shouted encouragement from the sidelines or offered water along the way. How exhilarating to hear their support.

While the community was essential, I quickly realized that I wasn't racing against anyone but myself. I am not fast, but the run—or walk or run-walk combo—is the important part, not the time or competition. Every time I have participated in such a race, I have felt high for hours. Just remembering the experience lifts my heart.

I had to stop and walk a lot, and in our faith journeys, we also slow down and stumble. Parts are steep, others downhill. Sometimes a race or faith journey is like a labyrinth, with lots of turns. Our paths are not straight and simple, and we make mistakes, like Samson and David and Moses and Abraham and Rahab and Sarah and Jael and Eve.

Reading the whole stories about all of these heroes reminds us that endurance races, like faith, are not simple. That's where the perseverance comes in. I hear that word a lot differently since my own Pew to 5K journey. I remember running a mile on a treadmill while at a conference in Williamsburg in February 2019. I had not run for a mile since 8th grade PE. I dreaded the thought of trying to run or walk the three-plus miles a 5K would take.

After my illnesses, the distance got harder, and I was slower and sweatier. And the reward was sweeter. Last November I completed a 5K in Arizona that I had first tried two years before in 2019, which was the first indication that something was wrong with my lung.

When I enrolled in the same race in 2021, I was initially determined that I would beat my lung-cancer time, now that the diseased part of my lung had been removed. Towards the end of the race I was struggling. I looked at my watch at one point far from the finish line and realized there was no way I would beat my previous time.

And then I heard my cardiothoracic surgeon's voice when I had asked him if I would still be able to run with one-and-a-half lungs. He had said "Yes, but your 5K time is going to go up." As soon as I remembered that I moved from walking to running. My time increased by a few minutes, and I didn't care because time was not the most important part.

Perseverance doesn't sound sexy. Faith may not sound sexy. But we Christians are called to these things by Jesus, the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." We are living through divisive times, and Jesus' words in the Gospel today might cause us to stumble. Keep the faith. Run with perseverance the race. Look to the great cloud of witnesses in your life and in this church.

I remember how exciting it was to encounter Greg Chadwick at my first Pew to 5K I participated in, even though he had not been to St. David's for a bit so didn't know we had set up a church team. He was there for the love of racing, and our St. David's racing community expanded even more.

I remember seeing Marti Stephens-Hartka's posts on Facebook about races long before I even considered participating in one myself. My post of hers was the first one after she had completed chemotherapy.

We find faithful people in the Bible and in church who have been through situations we are facing. We are never alone when we look to Jesus in community.

We will also find things that we do not want to see when we pick up Scripture—while I love the image of the race in today’s reading, I hate hearing about saints being flogged, stoned, sawn in two. Destitute, tormented, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. These were faithful people whom, the preacher says, did not receive what was promised. And of course, he brings up Jesus, who endured the shame on death on a cross.

I appreciate the preacher not being unduly rosy, and I especially appreciate “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Our current times call for perseverance. For continuing to put our faith in the center. This is not a one-time action, but something we must repeat Sunday after Sunday, week after week, year after year.

In trying times like the ones in which we live, when divisions in our country and the world bleed into our church, we can convince ourselves that we don’t need each other, that we don’t need the church. Rather than embracing the idea of division because Jesus mentions the word today, take a longer view. What race are you on, and how can you persevere? How can your faith enable you to endure?