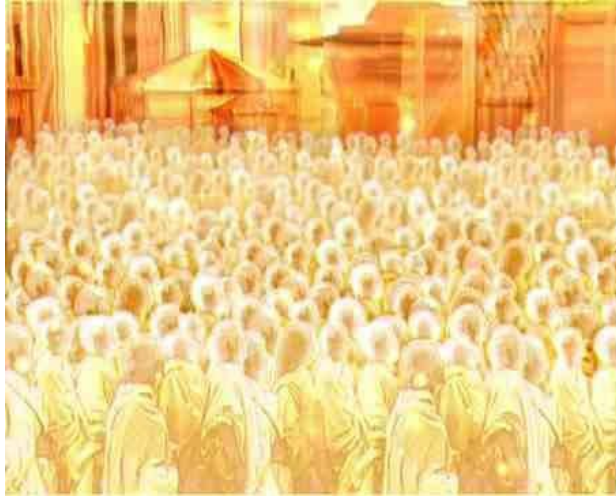


Sermon – August 14, 2022
“Let Us Run with Perseverance”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Hebrews 11:29—12:2

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill us with open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! I hope that we are all enjoying these unexpected cooler temperatures. It seems we are blessed with a break in the midst of our summer heat. I hope that we have all been able to open our windows and let some cool, fresh, low-humidity air into our homes.

This past week was a pivotal week in the life of Fairfields and Afton. On Monday, August 8th, after weeks of discernment and prayer, the Administrative Council at Fairfields voted to disaffiliate from the UMC and to affiliate with the Global Methodist Church (GMC). The membership was canvassed by phone calls from members of the Administrative Council to determine their desires, and the results are 84% for disaffiliation from the UMC and affiliation with the GMC. At Afton, the Leadership Board, during their last meeting, voted to disaffiliate, and they set a date for a disaffiliation straw poll this past Thursday, August 11th. Members gathered on Thursday evening and held the straw poll with the results of 84% voting to disaffiliate from the UMC and affiliate with the new Global Methodist Church. A second vote

was held with 99% voting to proceed under the approach of the UMC Book of Discipline paragraph 2548.2. These proceedings and the results mean Fairfields and Afton will be joining a lawsuit to seek better financial terms for disaffiliation. If you have questions and would like more information about the GMC, please get in touch and I will work with you to address your questions and concerns. The immediate consequences to those votes are that those who voted to remain in the UMC may feel isolated and need reassurance that they are welcome and loved as part of these congregations as we move into a journey to the Global Methodist Church. Other changes will come as we move through the legal, procedural, and polity changes that moving to a new denomination will entail. We will be talking about those changes and keeping you informed as best we are able. Please keep both of these congregations in your prayers as they move forward on this path, and please keep the leadership of these congregations in prayer as they work through the many obstacles and decisions that need to be made along this journey.

This morning we are continuing to look at faith in the context of the letter to the Hebrews. In this section of the letter, examples of faith from the Old Testament are provided to help us to grow in our understanding of faith and to encourage us in our own faith journeys. This morning's scripture reading provides excellent examples of actions taken by ordinary people in the hope of a new reality.

The first example of faith is from a key moment in the life of every Hebrew, the Exodus. The faith of the Hebrew slaves as they fled from Egypt is the entry point used by the letter's writer into the Hebrew Hall of Fame of faith. It is by faith that the Hebrews, in response to God's command to "go forward," enter the separated waters of the Red Sea and move into the sea as if on dry land. It is also by a lack of faith in God that the Egyptians, when they follow the Hebrews into the sea, are drowned, as they are not following a command of God, but of Pharaoh, who is not God. The walls of Jericho also collapse when the Hebrews, in faith, follow the strange command of God to walk around the city each day for seven days and on the seventh day after walking around the city seven times to shout, causing the walls to collapse and the city to be captured. Notice that Rahab is saved through her faith in God, a faith stated to the Hebrew spies sent to Jericho as Israel begins its conquest of the Promised Land. Her words to the spies are found in Joshua 2:11, "I know that the LORD has given you the land ,..." Rahab, a Gentile, a member of a tribe destined for extinction, has faith that the Lord will give the land to Israel and asks for mercy from Israel in response to her faith in this God of Israel. She shows kindness to

the spies, hiding them from the leaders of Jericho, and her life and the lives of her family are spared. Rahab is a prostitute, one who John Wesley refers to as “Though formerly one not of the fairest character.” Yet through her faith, she becomes part of Israel and the lineage of King David and Jesus. Look how different she is from the rest of the people living in Jericho. She alone has faith in the Hebrew God and welcomes and protects the spies. She alone ties a crimson rope in her window and, of all those living in Jericho, she alone is spared with her family. In this list of Old Testament faith stories, her story stands out as God working through someone not of the Hebrews. God works through ordinary people with pasts that are questionable but redeemable through God’s mercy and grace.

The writer of Hebrews says he will not mention in detail all of the faith stories of the Old Testament, but does a masterful job of summarizing those stories in a few short verses. Think about the stories he points us to: David the king who conquered kingdoms, Samuel the prophet who administered justice, Daniel who survived the lion’s den, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego (or Rach, Shack and Benny as a 1995 VeggieTales episode identifies them) who survived a fiery furnace, Barak who was mighty in war, and Gideon who put Midian to flight with 300 men armed with nothing but jars, torches, trumpets, and faith in God. There are two women in the Old Testament who received their dead by resurrection, the poor widow from Zarepath and the wealthy woman of Shunem. The poor woman’s son was restored to her by Elijah and the wealthy woman’s son by Elisha. Their sons’ lives were revived but they died in the fullness of time, their restored lives pointing to a better, coming resurrection. We may not know the prophet Jeremiah well, but he was stoned to death in Egypt by the remnant of Israel that fled there to avoid life under Babylonian rule. And the traditional view of the means of death for the prophet Isaiah was that he was sawn in half by King Manasseh for the prophetic words of warning he shared about Israel’s future which had been given to him by God. Speaking of Elijah and Elisha, we should recall that their garments were goat or camel hair, and it is to them that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews seems to refer. These are the examples of faith found in the Old Testament. These were normal, beat-up, bruised, and broken men and women, Jews and Gentiles, who heard God’s voice, and in faith lived their lives in light of the promises of God but did not receive them. I would encourage us to read again their stories and focus on their faith journeys. The writer of Hebrews states that the world was not worthy of any of these. Their lives stand out among the people of the world because of their faith in God.

Their examples of faith in action bring questions to our minds that we need to ask of ourselves. Each of the men and women listed by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews believed that God existed and was at work in their world. Questions we need to address in light of their faith are, “How would we live if we were assured that God existed, loved us completely, and has a destination for us for all eternity that is beyond the most wonderful place we have ever witnessed on earth or can imagine? How would we live if we believed that God was watching over us and is present with us in all of our activities and is waiting to reward us for our faith? How would we live in face of opposition to God if we really believe in God with all of our heart, soul, and might? How would we live if we understood that our lives depend entirely on God?” We might respond to these questions that we do believe and that we love God and that we have the expectation that when we die, we will go to heaven. The key question for us then becomes, “How would we live differently than we are currently living if we did not believe this about God? Would there be any difference between how we live now and how we would live if we did not believe?” If we in our full and complete belief in God live just as our neighbors who do not believe live, if we are indistinguishable from our unbelieving neighbors as a believer in Christ, then we have embraced the ways of the world. We are not set apart from the world but are also of the world. We are those who say we have faith, but the associated actions in our lives do not testify to our faith. Our lives, like those whose faith we have just seen summarized, must be radically different from the lives of non-believers. We are to be those who embrace the values of a heavenly kingdom and not the values of any kingdom on earth. We are to be those whose lives are an example of what it means to live by the standards of a heavenly kingdom. We, like these saints of faith, should stand out in the world. This radical difference in our lives is seen by others and they are drawn to Christ through the example of our faith lived out in community. As we live this radical new way, God can bear witness to us and use us for the work of His kingdom right here, right now. This is the choice of the narrow path. We become those who stand out because of our faith in God and His promises. We are those who are seeking to live our lives in a manner not to bring honor to ourselves, but to give honor and glory to God.

Think back to the list of examples of faith we have just encountered. These are ordinary people who had challenges, as we do, and were extended grace and lived by faith. They did not receive the promises of God, but died in their faith. They are a cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, whose stories we should read and share with each other. Theirs are the stories that encourage

us in our own faith race, to be those living in faith as God calls us. The writer of Hebrews uses the idea of a race to represent our faith journey, a race that is different for each of us. We each live a different life and will have a different race, a different set of challenges that we are asked to faithfully live in as we seek to follow Jesus. To run our race well, we are to set aside all that encumbers or weighs us down. No one who runs a race adds any extra weight or carries along more weight than necessary. To do so would be to run the race in a manner that one does not expect to win. We are to set aside the sins in our lives that cling to us, as those sins keep us from effective progress in our faith journeys.

In our faith journeys, we have this cloud of witnesses, but we also have Jesus Christ the perfecter of faith. As we run our own faith race in life, we are to look to Jesus, who endured the shame of the cross, as our guide. The cross was a means of punishment reserved for slaves and criminals. Roman citizens were exempt from this punishment. Only the lowest in society, those considered subhuman, were subjected to the shame of the cross. The cross was seen as a fit means of death for those killed on it and was to serve as an example of what awaited those who might choose criminal acts or seek to step out of service as a slave. Jesus does not shy away from the cross. In the garden, Jesus prays that the cup to come, death on a cross, might be removed, but prays in submission to the Father that God's will be done. Jesus is made perfect through his sufferings and after his resurrection, Jesus ascends to heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God. Jesus is glorified by God for the triumph Jesus had for God's purposes for His creation. Jesus submits to the shame of the cross and death and looks to the joy set before him, the joy of God's plan of redemption being completed for you and for me, for all of the world. In the end it is through Jesus and his example, his submission to the Father, his love of us, that he perfects our faith. In response to Jesus' love, we need to ask ourselves, "Are we running the race that Jesus has called us to run? Are we different from the world? Are we finishing the race strong with our eyes on Jesus and living lives that reflect his example of love for others?" It is worth contemplating these questions in prayer and allowing Holy Spirit to guide us into our response.

Pray with me: Jesus, we also desire to be ordinary people who are acting in faith to be part of your perfect plan for the world. Help us to ask ourselves if we are living in faith in a manner that is different from the world and if not, to repent, submit to the will of the Father, and run the race set out for us in faith as you, Lord, have shown us how to run. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.