

August 14, 2016
Hebrews 11:23-32, 39-40; 12:1-3
Pastor Elizabeth Kelsey
Creekside COB

“No Shortcuts”

I'm continuing the theme of faith this morning, following on in Hebrews 11 from where Rosanna left off last Sunday. She talked about the faith of Abraham who obeyed God, moving to an unknown place with the promise of becoming the father of many nations. The remainder of the chapter lists a host of other unusual, imperfect, lesser known biblical characters. As I read through the list I wondered how some of these people got in on a list of the faithful? Let's take a look.

- **Moses -- (Exodus) Moses' parents trusted God to protect their baby against Pharaoh's murderous threats. Moses grew up in the Pharaoh's palace, but as an adult he chose to side with God's people. Moses fought for the Israelites' release from Pharaoh. He trusted God to mastermind the escape strategy and to stick with Moses and the Israelites through 40 years in the wilderness.**
- **Joshua -- (Joshua 5-6) After Moses died, Joshua became commander in chief to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. God's idea of attacking Jericho by marching, blowing trumpets and shouting must have caused Joshua some angst. Yet, because he had seen God provide and protect Israel during 40 years in the wilderness, Joshua knew God was faithful.**
- **Rahab -- (Judges 6-8) The Israelite spies who were scouting the Promised Land got their "intel" from Rahab the prostitute. Rahab took a risk to trust both the spies and their God. She trusted that when her city was destroyed, the spies would keep their promise to save her family.**
- **Gideon -- (Joshua 6-8) Gideon learned two things: that when God speaks, fleece tests aren't necessary, and that with God**

“less is more.” In the conquest against Midian, when God told him to whittle down the troops from 32,000 to 300 men, Gideon had to trust that God wasn’t setting him up for failure. He had to trust that trumpets, clay pots and torches could get the job done. It was Yahweh’s victory, not his.

- **Barak -- (Judges 4) Time and time again during the period of the Judges, Israel was conquered by the Canaanite nation. Deborah, one of the judges of Israel appointed by God, called Israel’s military leader, Barak, to gather his forces and route out King Jabin’s army. Barak wouldn’t move against the enemy unless Deborah accompanied him. “God has given you the victory,” Deborah assured Barak. Together they battled and destroyed Canaan’s entire army.**
- **Samson - (Judges 13-16) Samson was a poor excuse for a judge of Israel. He had a vendetta against the Philistines, yet kept falling in love with Philistine women. He was reckless with his physical strength, and finally lost both his strength and his eyes over a haircut. In the end he trusted that God would do the right thing through his last ditch effort against the Philistines.**

But this “cloud of witnesses” weren’t perfect people.

- **David defeated Goliath with a sling and stone and became a good king. In fact, the Bible uses him as a standard against which all other kings were judged. Yet he blew it with Bathsheba.**
- **Rahab was a prostitute, and it was only because she chose faith in Yahweh that she is listed in the genealogical record of Jesus.**
- **Samuel was a good leader, but couldn’t rule his own household.**
- **Samson was unfocused, self-centered, and spoiled -- a playboy with an uncontrollable temper.**
- **Gideon, before God’s call came to him, was a Baal worshipper, and in spite of seeing Yahweh’s power, he returned to Baal worship in the end.**

If you were identifying people of great faith, what would you use for criteria? I probably would not put characters like Samson and Gideon on my list of heroes. Anna Diehl notes that some of the heroes in Hebrews 11 are there as people “who experienced God doing

miraculous things through them. God sometimes works through the unlikely and even the disobedient (such as Jonah) in order to get His Divine agenda done. The lesson we can glean . . . is that God's power and his approval are two very separate concepts. Just because God works miracles through a particular human does not mean that human is commendable in His eyes," concludes Diehl.¹

Hebrews 11:33-38 says it was "through faith" that they "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight."²

"God was able to use each of these flawed heroes to preserve his people," Emily Reynolds writes. "It was their faith and perseverance and not their innate ability that enabled them to be used by God. It is those moments of faithfulness, not their moments of failure, the author of Hebrews remembers and uplifts."³

There is an old story about a tight rope walker who stretched a cable across Niagara Falls all the way from the American side to the Canadian side. To the applause of a growing crowd, the acrobat walked the tightrope above the rushing, cascading waters that thundered underneath. Then he went back up and rode a bicycle across and even walked it blindfolded. For his grand finale he took a wheelbarrow and playing to the crowd said, "Do you think I can push this wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls?" "Sure you can," came the thunderous response. To which he said, "Well, which one of you will volunteer to ride in the wheelbarrow?"⁴

What does it take to win in the Olympics of faith? Well, here's what it takes to be an Olympic athlete.

¹ Anna Diehl. "Gideon: Idolatrous to the End," <https://924jeremiah.wordpress.com/2013/06/10/gideon-idolatrous-to-the-end/>

² Emily Reynolds. "Hyperloop to start \$6 billion test track 'within weeks.'" Wired.com (UK). October 23, 2015.wired.co.uk.

³ Reynolds.

⁴ Reynolds.

To compete in the Olympics is a big deal. It takes hard work and a single focus. The truth is, Olympians give up a lot of freedom in order to follow a dream to be the best in their field. Their life involves 1200 hours of dedicated practice a year starting early in the morning. Diet and sleep are a rigid part of the schedule. It can mean moving away from home to find a coach and an Olympic training center. It takes a team of supporters-- family, fellow athletes, and coaches -- to keep them going when training gets tough. It can bankrupt a family to support a child's dream until they find sponsorships or scholarships. To succeed, you have to want it so bad you eat, sleep, and breathe it. You have to dream about it at night. Set goals. Endure the pain. Visualize success. The magic number to become great at something is about 10,000 hours. To stay great means continuing the same grueling schedule for the rest of your life. There is no Plan B.

A life of great faith has similarities to the efforts of Olympic contestants. Faith isn't a Sunday morning activity. Following God becomes our single focus. Where we live or how we serve may not be our first choice. God is our coach, the Christian community is our team. The church is the Olympic Village where we support each other and learn to get along. Our spiritual coaches help us set our course and goals. The competition helps us test our skills. When things go wrong or we meet tough competition, we know God is in control and can get us back on track.

Pierre de Coubertin says, "If someone were to ask for the recipe for 'becoming Olympic', I would say that the first prerequisite is to be joyful."⁵ Watching the American women gymnasts, their sheer joy of competition and community has been inspiring. Joy is what people want to see in an Olympic faith, too.

Listen again to the first verses in Hebrews 12: "Do you see what this means -- all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running -- and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed -- that exhilarating finish in and with God -- he could put

⁵ Pierre de Coubertin quote

up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's *there*, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!"

Never quit! "When Lloyd Douglas, author of *The Robe*, attended college, he lived in a boardinghouse. A retired, wheelchair-bound music professor resided on the first floor. Each morning Douglas would stick his head in the door of the teacher's apartment and ask the same question, "Well, what's the good news?"

The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of his wheelchair and say, "That's middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat. The piano across the hall is out of tune, but, my friend, that is middle C."

It's wonderful to know that in a changing world, there is something that is constant. "We all need a middle C. Relationships change. Health changes. Jobs change. The weather changes. Governments change. But the Good News is that Jesus never changes!"⁶

Perseverance is the hardest part of our work of faith. There is a Norwegian proverb that says: "A hero is one who knows how to hang on one minute longer."⁷ The author of Hebrews calls us to seek a deeper level for our faith, to push ourselves, to set goals. Faith is a distance run, and we need to pace ourselves, to not give up, and to run with all that we have.

The problem is that we are not much up for a distance run. We live in a world of instant gratification, instant communication. We like the anticipation and energy at the beginning of the race. But like the runner, we may find our faith sagging, our feet getting tired, and our breathing labored. It's hard to hang on one minute longer. But that is how we win the race. In our faith marathon, there are things that pull us back, like hurt, or disappointments, or disagreements, or stress.

⁶ Strayhorn, Billy D. "Heroes of faith" (sermon)

⁷ Strayhorn

The author of Hebrews says, “Lay aside the things that weigh you down.” He gives us heroes of faith to inspire us, a “cloud of witnesses” to cheer us on. Then he reminds us that Jesus has already pioneered the course. Jesus hung on and completed the race, in spite of the cross and shame. If we look to him, we can keep putting one foot in front of the other, hanging on one minute longer. Let’s do it. Let’s run the faith race!