

“The Race Set Before Us”

a sermon by

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Text: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

This summer I had the opportunity to spend some time in New England, specifically in Maine, Boston, and on Nantucket Island. I had never visited Maine but on this occasion had the opportunity to spend some time with some friends who have a home on Bailey Island, not far from Portland. On the way to the Island we went through the town of Brunswick. There is a small church in the center of the city, right across the street from Bowdoin College. As our host pointed out, it was the church where Harriet Beecher Stowe worshipped. During a worship service she received the inspiration for a book that became a focal point for the Civil War in this country. The name of the book was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Several days later I had the chance to visit the church. There is a pew in this small church with a plaque commemorating the now famous moment when Harriet Beecher Stowe received this remarkable inspiration. As I looked around I saw another plaque on the wall noting that Martin Luther King, Jr. had preached in that church during the heights of the Civil Rights Movement, and that Eleanor Roosevelt had spoken there as well. As I looked around that church, which in many ways reminded me of this church in its style and architecture, I remembered the words of the writer of Hebrews who wrote about “being surrounded by a cloud of great witnesses.”

I.

The compelling image of the Scripture from which I have read is that of a foot race. The writer of Hebrews draws this image from the Roman games. In almost every place where the Roman Empire extended its tentacles, there were arenas or coliseums that provided a venue for the famous Roman games.

In this passage of Scripture the writer of Hebrews envisions such an arena. He speaks of the “cloud of witnesses,” the spectators sitting in the stands surrounding the arena. He notes that the runner must shed any clothing or weight that in any way would hinder his running. He observes that all runners must fix their eyes on the finish line, knowing that any distraction has the capacity to keep them from running to the best of their ability.

The image of the Christian faith as a race is found throughout the Old and New Testament. The prophet Isaiah speaks of God as “the one who gives strength to the weary and might to those who would faint, so that those who wait on the Lord will mount up with wings as eagles and not be weary or faint” (Isaiah 40:27-31). The Apostle Paul, nearing death and writing to his young friend Timothy, recalls that he has “fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith” (II Timothy 4:7).

This morning, as we begin the fall season and celebrate Rally Day, I want to hold before you this image of the “race set before us,” and in doing so, want to remind us of several things that are critical for our church at this particular point and time.

II.

The first, of course, is the cloud of witnesses. In the Eleventh Chapter of Hebrews, the writer of this Epistle gives us one of the most succinct definitions of faith found in Scripture. “Faith,” he writes, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Then he recounts the great exploits of those men and women of the Old and New Testament who demonstrated that faith: Abel, who rendered to God a more faithful sacrifice than his brother Cain; Abraham, who left his home and family to go to the place God had called him; Moses, who led the people of Israel to the land of promise. He calls to mind the many heroes of the Old and New Testament—too many to mention: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. He mentions those women and men in the New Testament who underwent persecution, stoned to death, killed by the sword and sawn in two—those of whom he said, “The world was not worthy.”

Two weeks ago, when I was in Boston, I had the opportunity to walk what is called the “Freedom Trail” that traces some of the landmarks of the American Revolution. It is hard to make that journey without some sense of the tremendous amount of courage that these men and women exhibited in breaking away from the British Empire. Along the way are the burial sites of some of our great national heroes: John Hancock, Paul Revere, and Samuel Adams—just to name a few. The risk involved in that event was almost incalculable. Benjamin Franklin was certainly on target when he told his fellow patriots that if they did not hang together then they

would certainly hang separately, and every person who signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 knew that if the revolution failed, he had signed his death warrant.

As I look around me, I sometimes wonder if we have not lost that kind of courage in the church. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Romans, wrote “For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also the Greek” (Romans 1: 16).

One of the things that has been lost today in our society is the notion of the “common good.” When the founders of this nation envisioned a republic in which the individuals would be free to pursue their own self-interest, but that self-interest had to always be balanced by the common good.

When I look about me today in our community, I see that this notion of the “common good” is lost. The County Commission, the School Board, the City Council—all we have are groups fighting for their own small interests. Where are the statesmen? Where are the citizens of the community—the bankers, the lawyers, the ministers, the doctors, who understand that the parts cannot succeed, if the whole does not succeed?

III.

The second critical dimension of the race set before us is the centrality of Jesus Christ. Just as the runner has to concentrate solely on the finish line, the writer of Hebrews speaks of running with perseverance the race set before us, “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” You see, if we don’t do this, then nothing else we do at First Presbyterian Church will make any difference.

Dr. John Leith, in his book *The Reformed Imperative*, makes the point that there is only one thing that the church can do in our society that no one else can do, and that one thing is the “proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Everything else we do can be done by other agencies and groups, most of whom can do it better than we. There are social scientists who understand the dynamics of our society far better than most of us who are ministers. There are psychiatrists and psychologists who are far more qualified to counsel troubled people than those of us who are ministers. There are political scientists and politicians who can propose legislation and political activities with far better acumen than the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). But there is one word that the church can speak that no one else can speak and it is the word about the power of God in Jesus Christ. It is this power that not only can transform individual lives, but it has the power to transform society itself.

But you have to begin with the affirmation about Jesus Christ. The most critical question that the church has to deal with today is not homosexuality, the war in Iraq, or global warming. The most critical question is what we believe about Jesus Christ. As Dr. Leith points out in his book, the critical question for the church is how we answer the question that Jesus posed to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Those churches that can answer that question by saying “You are the Christ, the son of the living God” with conviction, without equivocation, and with

clarity are precisely those churches that will be vital, growing, and dynamic churches. Those who cannot answer that question with conviction and certainty are doomed to certain death.

IV.

The third critical dimension to the race set before us is discipline. The writer of Hebrews understands this. It takes discipline to run a race. A runner must train for months, if not years, to be prepared for a race. Discipline is hard. It can be discouraging. As every parent knows, there are times when we must discipline our children. Ernest Campbell, who for many years was the minister at the Riverside Church in New York City, once told of a man who was lost in the city. He asked a cab driver, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice," said the cabbie, "Practice, practice, practice."

This morning, as we begin a new year together, I want to hold before you the critical nature of the discipline of the church. The Directory of Worship of the Presbyterian Church speaks of the "means of grace" that are offered to us: divine worship, Christian education, Bible study and the life of prayer. Unless we are willing to commit ourselves to these disciplines, we will not succeed in the opportunities that God has given to us.

This past Monday I attended the memorial service for John Belk at Myers Park Presbyterian Church. He is a person that this community will miss in many ways. He was not only a close personal friend of mine; he was a committed Christian, and one of the most outstanding citizens our city has ever produced. At the memorial service, one of the speakers spoke of John Belk's faith and the way that faith had shaped his whole life. He went on to say how often John Belk talked about the fact that the city of Charlotte was founded by Presbyterians. There were seven pre-Revolutionary War Presbyterian Churches that ringed the city. These Presbyterians, who were predominately Scots-Irish, brought with them as vision of the city. They had been nurtured by Calvin's work in Geneva and the legacy of John Knox in Edinburgh. They brought with them a vision of the transforming power of Christ to shape the lives of an entire community.

Is not that really the mission of this church—to be a witness to the transforming power of Jesus Christ for our entire community? As I look about me today, I see a city and a nation that is polarized: rich and poor, black and white, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatism. There are 650 churches in Charlotte in many shapes and forms and they all have their own witness. But for the life of me I cannot think of a church that has a greater opportunity to make a difference in this city than the opportunity that is before us today.

If not Charlotte, then where? If not First Presbyterian, then who? If not now, then when?

Amen!