

11. Perseverance

CHRIST ENCOUNTERS

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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Evening Lesson

Our time reflecting on the book of Hebrews has been all too brief this week. Sometime we'll have to return and go into it more deeply. The writer of Hebrews wants us to understand the nature of Jesus Christ and the new covenant which he brings. So we have looked at three aspects of encountering this Christ. We encounter Christ in *mystery*, in *redemption*, in *hope*, and now tonight, in *perseverance*.

The evening lesson at the beginning of chapter 12 actually concludes chapter 11 where the writer has presented various Old Testament persons who exemplify the life of faith. Of these heroes and heroines the writer says at the end of chapter 11, "They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy." (Hebrews 11.37-38a) Following their example, the writer exhorts fainthearted Christians to bolster their faith and persevere.

Hebrews 12.1-3 (NRSV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

ONE: Lay aside what hinders

To persevere in faith requires two things. First, we must *lay aside what hinders*. Obviously the writer uses an athletic metaphor here. He pictures a footrace in a stadium full of spectators. The Old Testament heroes and heroines mentioned in chapter 11 are a "great a cloud of witnesses" who watch the race. But they are not merely spectators. They themselves have already run the race. It is as if they ran, passed on the baton, and then gathered to cheer for their teammates who are still running.

With this image in mind, we are urged to "lay aside every weight." We know that just before athletes run, they take off their warm-up clothes. But ancient athletes competed naked. So the image in the writer's mind is literally to strip away everything that could hinder running.¹ For anyone who runs or even walks a lot, you know how great it is when the weather warms and you can go out in just shorts and a t-shirt. It feels wonderful to not be held back by bulky sweat pants and jackets and gloves and hats. So being free to run is what the writer had in mind.

¹ The image of removing clothing to symbolize the removal of sin became a frequent metaphor in early Christian teaching (cf. Romans 13.12, Ephesians 4.22, 25, Colossians 3.8, 1 Peter 2.1, also James 1.21).

What hinders our freedom? The writer of Hebrews would answer “sin.” Sin hinders our freedom. But he has a particular kind of sin in mind, namely that we do not persevere in the life of faith. The temptation of every runner, particularly in the final moments of a race when it really hurts, is to stop or slow down. So we are urged to “run with perseverance” and to “not grow weary or lose heart.”

I’ve been running for almost twenty-two years now and over the years I think running has taught me a lot about faith. I don’t run as much as I would like nor as much as I use to. I used to run four or five times a week. Now I’m lucky if I run that often in a month. And I’ve never run very fast, but there are some great lessons in it.

First, no one can run for you and no one can get it shape or train for you. It’s something you have to do for yourself. Second, running is something that you do better some days than others. No matter how hard you train or the level of your conditioning, some days will be easier than other days. The secret is to persevere even when you feel slow and sluggish. Third, running has taught me to run to the end. For me speed is not important; winning isn’t what I run for. But finishing is. It’s important to persevere to the end.

So I got to thinking about what hinders my running and I wondered if that has any application to faith. I think it does. Three things hinder my running. First, I get too busy. My days and nights get filled up with too many things — most of them good things. Then I don’t have time to strap on shoes and get out on the road. That may be true spiritually too. If we’re too busy, even with good things, then we won’t persevere in our spiritual races.

Second, I get too fat. I tend to specialize in yo-yo dieting. I lose weight and then I gain most of it back. No one in his or her right mind would carry a bowling ball with them when they went out for a run. But that’s exactly what I’m doing every time I’m sixteen pounds over my desired weight. (Right now I’m about two bowling balls over!) That makes running much less fun. The same is true when we are spiritually fat: we carry with us too much guilt, too much anger, and too much doubt, all of which make persevering with Christ more difficult.

Third, I get too lazy. It’s sure easy to find other things to do when I should be running and that’s not a sign always of busyness. It may just as well be a sign of laziness. It’s easier to do the other stuff rather than the hard work of running. The same thing can happen spiritually. We can do all kinds of things that are “Christian” and still be too lazy to do what will really bring us close to God. Only if we if we lay aside these hindrances can we persevere with Christ.

TWO: Look to Jesus

The second thing we must do to persevere in faith is to *look to Jesus*, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. While it is true that no one can run the race for us, not even the Lord, we are still urged to follow Christ because encountering him helps us persevere in the race of faith.

I don’t know if anyone has ever explained why this works. But even slow runners like me know we can run faster than normal if we keep our eyes on someone else who is out ahead of us. The same is true for world-class runners. Almost all records for the mile or the 1,500 meters have been set using “rabbits,” that is, persons who will set a fast early pace so that the very best runners can follow them until the very end. Well, Jesus is more than a rabbit but he sets the pace for us and we will run stronger for keeping our eyes on him.

We watch Jesus because he is not some out-of-shape spectator sitting up in a luxury sky box

sipping white wine while we're down in the stadium grunting away in the race of life. No, Jesus has already run the race, already "endured the cross." He knows even more than we what the pain is like when the end is near.

When life really beats you up, do you ever ask "why me?" I do. Or do you ever think *what have I done to deserve this?* I do. But remember Jesus. He didn't do anything to deserve the cross. My friends, life is hard. Jesus Christ didn't die so you and I can be spiritual couch potatoes. He died so we might live. When we see the race that Christ had to run, when we keep our eyes on him, we will persevere and "not grow weary or lose heart."

Since the baseball season is almost here I want to switch from a running metaphor to a baseball metaphor because this can help us persevere by looking to Jesus. While the Red Sox are in spring training getting ready to defend their World Series title, I've started to read probably the best novel ever written about baseball — Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*. Some of you will also remember the movie that was based on the novel. It came out about twenty years ago starring Robert Redford as Roy Hobbs — the natural. He had a special gift: he was simply the best ball player there ever was.

My Little League team was named the Boston Red Sox, so I've always had soft spot for the Sox. Now don't hold this against me. But I confess that when I was a boy my favorite team was the Yankees because my baseball hero was Mickey Mantle. So reading *The Natural* brings back memories all those lazy days of summer when I was growing up and it seemed like the only thing I had to worry about was whether Mickey, Yogi, and Whitey could lead the Yankees to another pennant.

Of course, *The Natural* evokes a simpler era. Life always seems nicer and easier when we look backwards because we know how the story turned out, including our own story. But that's not why it is a good book. Nor is good just because Roy Hobbs is a ballplayer. Baseball is a great game, maybe the greatest. But the book isn't just about baseball.

No, although they develop the idea differently, both the book and the movie portray Roy Hobbs as a genuine hero. Yes, he is the best ballplayer but more importantly, he loves the game. He loves baseball. He won't cheat it. He won't sell out for money. He won't let people down even when he has to play hurt. He has integrity. When the movie came out, Robert Redford said this about his character Roy Hobbs: "He's given a rare gift (of athletic ability) and a set of instructions (on how to use his gift) from his father, and yet he falls from grace, and the rest of the movie is about how he comes back from that fallen state."²

Of course, Jesus doesn't fall from grace. But when all of us who do fall from grace look to him, he helps us persevere. *He is the one true natural*. He is ahead of us, that we might follow him. And we encounter him in mystery, in redemption, in hope, and in perseverance. So, look, my friend. Look to Jesus and lay aside what hinders.

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

² An interview with Redford by Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune*.