

We Are The Church...Together!

A Sermon by Rev. Cal Chinn
August 18, 2019



Hebrews 11:29-12:2

29By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. 30By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. 31By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—33who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37They 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— 38of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 39Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12Therefore, 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, 2looking 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.

My wife Sharon and I spent our 2 week vacation with her father in Hood River, Oregon. It is where Sharon spent her high school years and the home to which she returns for family reunions. I am a native San Franciscan and have lived here longer than anywhere else. I was born in Chinese Hospital, attended public schools, and was baptized in the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown. When I am in Sharon's family home in Hood River, I enjoy viewing family photos that span many years and many generations. There are photos of her grandparents, her parents' wedding pictures, the first baby pictures of Sharon and her siblings, graduation photos, photos of grandchildren. I have carefully stored away photos of my family in China—my grandparents whom I never met, aunts and uncles I met when I first visited my family village in China. I love the wedding photo of my parents, my mother was only 16. I

cherish the photos of my parents when they first arrived in America. One of my favorite photos is of an elderly woman whom I knew as a child and addressed as *ab paw*, a woman who had bound feet. Most of these photos were snapped long before I came on the scene. And so I cherish viewing these photos because they tell stories and help recall memories.

That is what the writer of Hebrews is doing in chapter 11. He helps us look at our family snapshots in the gallery of faith: remember those who crossed over the Red Sea; remember Rahab, the prostitute who welcomed the scouts; remember those who marched around Jericho; remember Samson and Daniel; remember those who won strength out of weakness like Gideon and Esther. As we look at this remarkable family the writer of Hebrews sketches, we discover images of triumph—conquering enemies, obtaining promises, shutting the mouths of lions, even gaining victory over death. We discover also portraits with images of suffering—public mocking, imprisonment, beating, stoning, homelessness, violence, and death. Why should we look at this photo album of faith and faithfulness? Because in looking we learn who we are. We learn that we are not alone and that we are part of a family with particular traits and characteristics. We learn that faithfulness is a mixing of suffering and triumph, giving us hope for faithfulness shines both in suffering and in triumph, both in sorrow and in joy.

The sketches are quickly done with imaginatively broad-brush strokes. And it is not always clear which Old Testament heroes and heroines of the faith in particular the text has in mind among the many who are named. Take for example Rahab, “the prostitute,” who is singled out. My family album includes members we might prefer to keep in the closet. I have a cousin who was dis-owned by my aunt and uncle; and I never knew why. As a child growing up in Chinatown, I had an uncle whom we all called “red face uncle” because he had a drinking problem; who also thought he could keep secret the fact that he had two wives, one in San Francisco and one in China. As is the case in all our families, the gallery of faith in the Bible is a mixed lot—Noah was a drunk, Abraham was old, Sara was impatient, Jacob was a cheater, Moses stuttered, David had an affair, Jonah ran from God.

Then comes this remarkable claim: that for all of their greatness and flaws, these saints of faith did NOT receive what was promised. Their completion—their “perfection”—awaited the generations to come, the future generations of saints adding their names and photos to the family album. A final lap would be made in the presence of onlookers—the “great cloud of witnesses”—who are cheering the exhausted runners on. In Hebrews, the onlookers are the very saints of old described earlier in Chapter 11, from Abel to the Maccabean martyrs. We remember our company, the cloud of witnesses cheering us on; but we remember our contest. You and I have a race to run. We are not mere tourists in this world, wandering from place to place, taking pictures, visiting landmarks, posting on Instagram and Facebook, and then returning to the safety of home. We are runners in a race, and it is not a fifty-yard dash, but a marathon.

In his latest book, *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, & Getting Old*, Parker Palmer adds a word of caution and correction to our common perception that our role as elders is to put all our hopes for the future in the hands of the younger generation. He admonishes us to stop talking about “passing the baton” to the young as we elders finish running our laps. Palmer writes that “*after all, the problems the younger generation face are partly due to the fact that we, their elders, screwed up. Worse still, it’s not true that the young alone are in charge of what comes next. We—young and old together—hold the future in OUR hands.*” Palmer changes the metaphor. Instead of “passing the baton”, Palmer suggests “inviting young adults to join the orchestra”. He writes: “*As we sit together, we can help them learn to play their instruments—while they help us learn the music of the emerging world, which they hear more clearly than we do. Together we can compose something lovelier and more alive than the current cacophony, something in which dissonance has a place, but does not dominate.*” Our role as elders in the orchestra is to serve as mentors who can help the young to find their own music and to learn how to play it. And here is how Palmer describes his mentors who helped him find his own music: “*My mentors saw more in me than I saw in myself. They evoked that “more” in many ways—challenging me, cheering for me, helping me understand that failure is part of the deal. Then my mentors opened doors for me, or at least pointed me toward them. When I was willing to walk through those doors, I found purpose and meaning. My mentors changed my life.*”

Mentoring is not a one-way street! Mentoring is a gift exchange in which we elders receive as much as we give, often more. Palmer writes: *“We elders have gifts for the young, but the young are often unaware of the gifts they have for us. They rarely understand, for example, that when they approach an older person for mentoring, they assuage our fear that we’re over the hill and out of the game, that younger folks regard as irrelevant. Few people in their twenties know the power of saying to someone like me—who’s seen twenty nearly four times—“I want to learn from you.”*”

One more bit of wisdom from Palmer who writes: *“I disagree with elders who say, ‘We must keep the young from making the same mistakes we made!’ They’re going to make mistakes, but they’re not going to make the same ones we did. They are not us, their world is not the same as the one in which we grew up, and it’s possible that they’re wiser than we were!”* (Palmer, pages 33-34)

My first mentor was my mother, who not only saw my potential, but waited until I discovered it for myself and then confirmed my decision to go to seminary with her smile and words, *“I knew it all along.”* My Sunday School teachers who welcomed my questions and doubts, never squelching my curiosity and maddening refusal to accept their words blindly. The elderly member in my first call out of seminary, who invited me to his Friday Night Prayer Meeting. Naive and innocent, I didn’t know how to say “no”. And when I arrived at his home, he ushered me down a long dark hallway and into the room in the back of his house, lit only by a shaded light bulb, which hung over a poker table. Seated around the table were men his age, smoking cigars, playing poker. In that same church, a group of young people in the youth group, who were as interested in reading Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr as going to Disneyland and the Beach. The Native American who opened the door for me to do pastoral counseling at the Frontier, one of the 5 most dangerous bars in the State of Oregon. The Moderator of the General Assembly, who upon completion of his term of office was asked in an interview: *“Now that you have completed your service in the highest office of the church, can you go any higher?”* And he responded, *“Oh yes, there is one more step higher I can go. To serve as pastor of a small, rural congregation”*. When I heard those words, I knew he was thinking of me because he was my mentor, who made regular visits to the reservation where I struggled as pastor. The seminary student who came out as lesbian when she was accepted by her Presbytery as a candidate. She remained a candidate for 30 years before she was finally ordained, never wavering not only in her sense of call, but also in choosing to remain in the denomination that denied her ordination these many years. I can go on with the many, many saints in my “cloud of witnesses” who mentored me.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39-40) We are living in new and changing and challenging times that call for new compositions to be created and played. We are not finished, the end has not come. The reign of God has not been accomplished. Names continue to be added to Calvary’s roll call, names like Will and Erin and Brendan and Stephanie and Kimberly, Jeanine and Tulio, Alexa and Chloe, Indira and Emilio, Sam and Max...to name a few. With each confirmation class, we welcome a new generation of saints.

Together, we are the church. Together we can set aside every weight...and run with perseverance the race that is set before us...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith! AMEN.

